Midnight Strangers

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Midnight Strangers

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Summary

The man hovering over him leaned back, releasing Grian completely. Cold night air rushed in to fill the void.

“I guess it’s out in the open now,” the stranger hummed. “Shame. I wanted to avoid this.”

With the additional glow occupying the space between them, Grian was finally able to catch features that were lost in the prior darkness. His curiosity outweighed all else, and he drank them in greedily. As soon as he saw who sat across from him, alarms blared in his mind.

This man wasn’t a civilian, wasn’t even a hero.

“Hello, Doctor,” the villain mused. “You were quite the help today.”

- or -

Grian is a vet. After a chance encounter in the dead of night, during which he accidentally saves a villain from the brink of death, he suddenly finds himself entangled in a world beyond anything he could've ever imagined.

Notes

The following is a fic that I spent a lot of time researching in order to get as close to accurate when it comes to the fixing of injuries as possible. Though getting it perfectly correct is not physically possible, given this is a world with goddamn superpowers, it should be pretty close!

That being said, please proceed with the knowledge that the 'Blood, Gore, and Violence' tags are not for decoration. This is mostly a romance fic, but those shouldn't be overlooked.

Additionally, this is loosely inspired by Wild Life Session 7's superpowers and the team groupings. It's not required, but things will make significantly more sense if you read this work with that in mind.

Please enjoy!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grian wasn't expecting to actually witness anything on his way home from the clinic.

His coworkers had begged him not to go, had repeated over and over that there was a criminal activity warning in place, but he hadn't listened. Instead, he'd walked right out the door without a second thought. Half of what fueled his willful ignorance was exhaustion, and the other half was sheer delusion, but all of it was dumb on his part.

By that point, he just couldn't bring himself to care about potential threats in the area. The city was big – overrun with criminal activity, in his humble opinion. Grian had done some shoddy math in his head and decided the chance of him running into anything was low enough to risk it.

He was aware, subconsciously, of his own stupidity, yet he simply could not stay at his job for a minute longer. After fourteen hours on shift at the emergency vet clinic, Grian was desperate to get home. The too-smooth fabric of his scrubs and the scent of cleaning solution had overstimulated his tired mind ages ago. He could practically hear his bed calling to him as he neared the end of his work night. It would be such sweet relief.

Then, the peace of the night shifted into something sinister.

Distantly, his ears caught on the sounds of voices – shouting something that was indecipherable from so far away. Grian looked around, a frown on his face, in an attempt to pinpoint exactly where it was coming from. However, the sidewalks and roads remained visibly

empty.

Finally, Grian dared to glance up, and through the insufficient lighting of a street lamp, he caught sight of a silhouette.

A man stood on the roof of a building, balanced precariously on the edge. His form swayed in a nerve-wracking manner, way too unstable for being so high up. Gravity seemed to agree. Grian could only watch in slow motion as the stranger tipped further and further backward with every beat that passed.

There came a sound, like that of sharp whistling. Then, the figure stumbled, his last remaining foothold slipping out from underneath him.

He was *falling*.

Grian's breath hitched, heart catapulting into his throat. He tried to scream, tried to call out, but nothing would leave him. All he could do was gasp as the man fell down, down, down.

There came a sickening thud from within an alleyway. The world returned to silence.

It took several precious seconds for Grian's mind to catch up to his body. He wanted to gag, run, and break down at the same time. The building wasn't necessarily the tallest, but a fall from that height very well could've meant death should one land incorrectly. There was a non-zero chance that Grian had just witnessed someone *die*.

The reality hit him like a truck. His legs shook, vision blurred, and

head spun. Someone could be dead a little more than twenty feet from him. Someone could be dead in an alleyway without even so much as a warning. Someone could be dead, and *he* was the only one around to witness it.

"Oh my God," Grian rasped, a terrible thought flickering to life behind his eyes.

He was the only one around to witness it.

If the man was, by some twist of fate, *not* dead, *he* was the only one who could call for help.

Grian fumbled suddenly to switch his bag to his other hand. It was a hefty thing, almost constantly too full with equipment and emergency supplies should he ever need to make a house call for a client's pet. As soon as his grip was freed, he moved to grab his phone. Unfortunately, he came up empty.

He panicked, dropping his bag to search through the numerous pockets in his scrubs. His phone was supposed to always be in that one spot, but now he couldn't find it anywhere. Maybe, by some mistake, he'd thrown it in with the rest of his medical supplies, though that wasn't something he could picture himself doing.

Grian paused his frantic searching. He was wasting seconds he didn't have. The frustration bubbled to the surface, gathering throughout his veins into a hurried sort of armor. His resolve hardened, and he recognized that he couldn't afford to stand still for a moment longer.

Grian took one last deep breath, picked up his bag, and sprinted in the direction of the alleyway.

It was dark as he turned the corner. The lamplight only reached so far, and there were several piles of empty boxes and dumpsters to cast shadows in bothersome locations. Grian forced himself to hold his breath and just listen, searching for a shuffling sound, a heavy breath, a groan of pain, anything to indicate the man was still alive within.

Nothing.

He would have to confirm it with his own two eyes.

Grian pressed further into the alleyway, unsure of what waited beyond while his eyes adjusted. Every footstep was calculated and cautious, painfully small as well. Part of him feared he might step on a corpse if his strides were too large. Better not to allow false confidence than to desecrate someone's final resting place.

At last, a sound that did not originate from him echoed off the brick walls. Grian's head swiveled around, heart lurching and mind chanting, *not dead, not dead, not dead!*

But *dying* was not out of the equation yet. Grian rushed forward, disregarding his earlier concern now that he had been given a rough estimate of where to go. He stumbled over broken glass, tripped over stray boxes, but did not slow.

After ages of waiting, his eyes finally got used to the darkness enough to see the vaguest shape of a person propped against a wall. He practically collapsed by the guy's side, mind moving faster than he could handle. Years of training flooded through him, so much so that he was moving involuntarily before he could stop himself.

Grian took the man's hand, feeling for a pulse. It was hard to distinguish, and he poked around his neck next. A meager *thump, thump, thump* surprised him there. Then he let a finger rest beneath his nose, a few shallow breaths brushing his skin. The man was alive, but nowhere near in a steady state, and certainly not conscious.

He rocked back on his heels to take in the sight of the man, trying to plan out his next moves. Even though his eyes had adjusted as best they could, finer details were lost to Grian. The cause for the man's ailments — beyond falling from such a tremendous height — could not easily be deduced. He needed light.

Grian turned to his bag and restarted his search for his phone there. Supplies clinked, but no matter where he dug around, it was nowhere. He was beginning to suspect he'd forgotten it at the clinic. Not good. Without a phone, he'd have neither a sufficient light source nor a way to call an ambulance. There weren't even any passersby on the street for him to beg for help.

The vet debated what little choices he had. Perhaps, if he channeled all the energy he had left, Grian could carry the stranger until they encountered someone else? Or maybe just into the nearest bit of lamplight? That sounded easy enough. He lifted large dogs at work all the time, so surely this wasn't much different.

Agreeing with his own line of thinking, Grian leaned forward and blindly felt around where he could vaguely see the man's shoulders to be. Unfortunately, in doing so, he was made aware of exactly how wide in stature the stranger was. His shoulders were broad, and his arms were fit. More than that, while he was knocked out, he was dead weight, which made everything harder.

If the rest of him matched in scale, then Grian likely couldn't lift him far enough to make a difference while he was like this – especially should he wish to avoid injuring the guy further.

It was for necessity's sake that he let his hands clumsily feel around the other's torso, just to see how difficult this was going to be. A groan came from the stranger's throat, low and pained. Then, Grian felt something strange. It was warm, and as soon as he touched it, his heart stopped.

Shakily, Grian shifted his hands slightly over. He nearly screamed when they made contact with a long, thin stick, feathered at the end. No light was needed to know what he'd discovered.

An *arrow*.

There was an *arrow* buried in this man's side.

He hadn't simply fallen off a building at all. It was deliberate. He'd been attacked.

Grian wasn't stupid enough to miss what that meant about the culprit. Only a few people in the city used something as old-fashioned and flashy as arrows for weapons nowadays.

Villains.

Despite being so certain that he wouldn't encounter anything, Grian had gone off into the evening and found someone who had reached a much worse fate. Getting shot by a villain, toppling off a roof, relying on a stranger without the proper human medical knowledge — whoever this was, his luck was beyond rotten. And now, he was Grian's problem as well.

The confirmation of a larger wound solidified an upsetting truth that had been festering in the back of his mind for several minutes. No way to call for help, no time to hesitate any longer, no use delaying the inevitable.

The puncture wound of an arrow wasn't a laughing matter. A variety of things could lead to the death of the man across from him in this instant. Blood loss, the piercing of a major organ, infection from the dirty alleyway, and the impact of falling from a rooftop were just a handful of the dangers that could compromise everything.

Grian had no choice. He was going to have to fix this himself.

"Alright," he whispered, mentally hyping up his own skills. Though he couldn't see it, Grian let his hand brush against all of his equipment, listing them off in his head.

He had the materials necessary to clean and stitch up the wound. However, there was a distinct issue with the few painkillers he kept on him. The dosages for a human would be difficult for him to calculate without knowing his patient's weight, and they didn't have time to waste.

With or without a numbing agent, it would be fine. The procedure would be fine. The patient would be fine. He repeated in his mind that it was *fine* until he almost believed it. Surgeries of various severity were things he'd done frequently for animals at the clinic.

Pets were wiggly little things, covered in layers of fur and often with much less tolerance for physical stress than humans. For procedures like the one needed in this situation, they required anesthesia and a load of patience. A human should be easier. They could reason, withstand, survive. It was unlikely that intense stressors would cause the guy's heart to give out the way it might to a rabbit or other small

animal.

Shamefully, a mountain of nerves bubbled in his chest regarding the specifics of the scenario. All he knew about arrows was through historical texts and late-night internet searches. His mind was warped with disbelief and anxiety at actually putting that minuscule research to good use.

Still, it had to be done, or else it would quickly become much worse. There was no telling the next time someone would walk past with a working phone. And that was fine. Out of all the people that could've discovered this dying man, Grian was his best bet. The guy's life would be at risk with anyone less qualified.

Nerves had no place within him. He wasn't an amateur. Grian worked well under pressure – he had to for the sake of his job. He forced himself to focus on doing this as correctly as he could. Getting hung up on this being above his usual pay grade was not advisable in the slightest.

The vet had begun to adjust the other to account for his injury when a cough sputtered from the throat of the man in question. It was followed by an even deeper groan. The man was stirring. How inconvenient.

"What? Who–?" The stranger's voice was hoarse, extremely agonized. He raised a trembling hand, and Grian took it hastily. "What's happening?"

"Rest," Grian shushed. "I'm here to help."

Instead of calming him, the words seemed to send a shot of adrenaline through the injured man. He jerked, as if attempting to sit up. Grian's

heart squeezed at the scream of pain that echoed around them.

“Hey, come on. You’re hurting yourself. Calm down,” Grian rushed. “I know it sucks, but I need you to stop.”

The vet did his best to coax him to relax again, but the other heaved out fast breaths and did not heed his warning. Finally, Grian grew irritated. Without really thinking it through, he slammed a hand down on the other’s shoulder, pinning him back against the wall. The man paused his fighting all at once, likely shocked.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I was going to help,” Grian gritted out. “Now, quit moving and *listen.”*

There was a shuffling sound, and in the dimness, Grian thought he saw a nod. He exhaled, releasing his grip on both the other’s torso and his hand. The stranger thankfully did not move again.

“Who,” he heard the same rough voice start, “Who are you?”

“My name is Grian,” he answered. “I’m a vet, and I’m going to do what I can for you. This isn’t going to be a pretty process, so are you willing to help me out a little bit as well?”

“Um… okay, yeah,” the other said, quiet and cautious. “I guess I could.”

“Perfect,” Grian hummed. “First, do you have any light sources on you? Like a phone or something?”

A beat of nothing passed between them. Then, the stranger gradually raised his hand. Grian's eyes widened as a faint red light flared to life, seeming to come out of thin air. The stranger moved his finger in repetitive, circular motions, letting the light grow steadily brighter at the tip of it.

He knew what it was the second his gaze fell upon it – a *superpower*.

"Woah," Grian gasped. "I have to say… this isn't what I had in mind."

Superpowers were rare, and for a civilian with said powers to *reveal* them was even rarer. The Hero Agency recruited any they could find with remarkable characteristics, claiming they were too valuable to be allowed to roam around unchecked. A grand majority of villains originated because of exactly that, so it was better to keep quiet if one had powers and didn't feel like working for the Agency.

There weren't any details that were particularly threatening about this individual's revealed powers, though. All it seemed to do was shed light on their situation, and it wasn't even all that bright.

Still, anything was a blessing in the shadowy alleyway, whether it be barely feasible and tinted red or not. Grian observed the details that had been previously lost to him. The wound was the easiest thing for his gaze to latch onto.

There was blood everywhere, and more leaking out around the arrow as the seconds passed. Whatever outfit the man had on was torn and ruined, sticking to the wound in a way that was surely unpleasant. Grian went ahead and ripped the majority of it away, careful not to make the circumstances worse than they had to be.

It didn't look terribly deeply embedded, but the tip was the problem

he was most worried about. Luckily, from his surface level knowledge of human anatomy, he was fairly certain there were no arteries nor major organs in the specific area that had been pierced. If it had been slightly more to one side, it likely wouldn't have hit the guy at all.

Moving along vaguely, he scanned for alternative injuries. Perhaps the most surprising thing of all was that he didn't see any limbs that looked out of place. After falling from a roof, wouldn't a broken bone or two make sense?

He shook his head, writing it off as a stroke of good luck, and forced himself back on task. With the ability to see slightly regained, Grian returned to searching his bag. He retrieved a box of rubber gloves, a handful of tools, alcohol, chlorhexidine, gauze, bandages, and two clean cloths.

One of the cloths was laid out on the ground at his side to make the tools more easily accessible. Before doing anything with them, he let his eyes wander over the other's outfit. Though it was a bit bloody, he found what he was looking for. With a whispered apology, he removed the man's belt and held it up to his face. "I don't have drugs. You're going to have to bite this."

Thankfully, the man complied. His expression was cast in shadow still, as the light only reached so far, but Grian could bet he'd find fear there if he could see it. No one wanted to experience an impromptu surgery from someone they didn't know. It was a nightmare situation for both of them.

"And put these on, please," Grian said, passing him the box of gloves. The man only took one, presumably keeping his other hand free for the sake of their light source. Grian put on a pair too, then continued. He opted to explain what was happening to keep the panicking to a minimum. "I'm going to fish out the arrowhead, and then stitch you up to the best of my ability. Is that alright?"

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then a vague nodding movement. He couldn't speak around the belt, but the confirmation was enough.

Grian picked up the gauze. He unwrapped several large squares, then took the lids off his bottles of alcohol and chlorhexidine. With a spoken warning, the vet began his cleaning of the wound. He alternated between pouring alcohol and chlorhexidine onto the gauze, and carefully prepped the area.

His patient was, to his credit, fairly well behaved. Except for a few slight shifts, the man remained remarkably unmoving. Grian was impressed that he could keep his powers going throughout the stinging pain to allow for visibility. Hopefully, that trend would continue into the main bit.

Once the cleaning was sufficiently complete, the real work could begin. Grian put the gauze aside and removed a few of his pre-sanitized tools from their autoclave bags.

"Okay. Here's the hard part," Grian started. "I need you to hold one side of your wound open, and bring this light closer with your other hand. Think you can do that for me?"

There was another quick nod. The vet proceeded.

The process itself was actually not that bothersome compared to some more pressing surgeries he'd done on smaller scales. The arrowhead was, expectedly, flared when he found it. However, the fact that his experience with this sort of projectiles was limited to fiction and history meant it was smaller than anticipated.

With a little incision and maneuvering, Grian was able to dislodge it and remove the arrow while avoiding major damages. The stranger groaned and let out soft cries, but he didn't fall unconscious or dim his light at all. It was rather impressive.

"Perfect! Great job. We're almost done," Grian whispered his reassurances. He took the removed arrow, wiped the blood off, and tossed it farther from them, hoping that it would do less damage there. "I'm going to stitch this up now, alright? Hold the two sides of the wound shut for me, just like this."

As soon as he'd coaxed his patient into doing as he was told, Grian backed up. He switched out his tools, wrapping the bloodied ones in a separate cloth to be sterilized later. Then, he retrieved his suture needles and their clamps, beginning the process of stitching the wound closed.

That was the easiest part for him, something he could do in his sleep. It was done after only a couple of minutes of precise work. The bandages were secured into place a moment later. Grian put his tools away, cleaned up the drying blood that remained on the man's skin, and sighed with relief. "Done."

The red light of the man's powers extinguished immediately, and he melted into the wall behind him. His chest rose and fell fast in the darkness of the alley, but his pained noises came after much longer intervals now.

"Thank you," came the man's scratchy tone. Grian hadn't noticed him removing the belt from between his teeth, but evidently he had. "I think you… saved my life."

"Don't mention it," Grian replied, though the other was correct. The guy would've likely bled out or gotten a life-threatening infection if

the wound hadn't been treated quite so immediately. "You should still probably get checked out by a human doctor to be safe."

Grian gradually faded out of his work mentality. They were still stuck in a grungy back alleyway in the middle of the night. It was no place for a patient to heal, and if there were bow-wielding villains shooting at civilians around the area, they wouldn't be wise to stay in one place for too long.

"Hey," Grian started. "I'm going to go see if I can flag down a car or find a payphone to call an ambulance. I'll be back."

"No! Wait," the man exclaimed, jerking and catching Grian's wrist as he stood. His grip was surprisingly strong. "Please, don't leave. I can't afford more attention drawn this way."

"You don't want an ambulance?" Grian frowned at the strange wording. "I'm pretty sure a hospital visit is still very much in order right now, so let me go–"

"Grian," the man insisted, and the vet paused. "That is your name, right? Grian?"

"Um, yes?"

"Well, Grian," he went on. "This is, unfortunately, the part where you have to listen to *me*. No hospitals, no ambulances, no flagging anybody down. That's too dangerous."

While Grian was glad to hear any amount of energy returning to the guy's voice, he didn't like this new attitude. What kind of egomaniac

did he have to be to think himself above proper medical attention? What danger exactly was he placing ahead of his own life? Not even Grian was confident enough in his job that evening to be certain nothing horrific had happened.

"Fine, wise guy," Grian huffed. "If not on a stretcher, how exactly do you plan on getting out of here without reopening your stitches?"

There was a heavy silence for several seconds. Finally, the guy stammered, "I'll call someone."

Grian's eyes widened, and he couldn't help but shout, "You've had a phone *this whole time?"*

"Woah, hey," the man gasped, volume dropping to a whisper. "Keep your voice down!"

"Why should I?" Grian, if anything, grew louder. His words bounced off the walls. "You just made me remove an arrow in *mood lighting* while you could've used a phone instead–!"

He was interrupted by a sharp tug on his arm where the other still had a hold on him.

Caught off guard, Grian stumbled forward and landed hard on his knees. He hissed, yanking back his wrist. The man moved faster than he expected, slapping a hand over his mouth and clamping the other on the back of his neck to keep him from getting away. Grian tried anyway, giving muffled complaints.

"Please, Grian," the man said, still keeping himself quiet. "Just…

listen! Don't you hear that?"

There was a new, underlying urgency in his pleading. It made the vet halt his struggle and stare forward. He assumed the man's face was directly across from his, but as before, no amount of adjusting to the light would allow him to decipher details.

Then, he *did* hear.

Somewhere beyond the alley, there was a crash, and the rising crescendo of approaching police sirens. It sounded like a continuous barrage of horrible things. Grian's brows furrowed as he attempted to pinpoint what exactly was happening. He did not like the conclusion he landed on.

His gaze flicked to where he knew he'd thrown aside a blood-soaked arrow, his ears caught on the disastrous cacophony of sound, and his mind connected the pieces around the reason why one might fear what could happen if they were to venture beyond the alleyway.

A fight.

That commotion was coming from a *fight,* and it was far too close for comfort. Only heroes and villains had the ability to cause such sudden, inexplicable unrest. As a lone civilian out at an ungodly hour of night, the possibility of encountering danger with a battle nearby was heightened significantly.

And then, he would also have to consider the fact that his scrubs were likely coated in someone else's blood. Whether he was the hero's main focus or not, seeing that sight stumbling down the street wasn't going to give the right impression to anyone.

The man had been smart to stop him, even though he'd gone about it in a confusing way.

Gradually, Grian relaxed, nodding into the hand on his mouth. With a relieved sigh, the other pulled away, slumping against the wall once more. "Thanks," he said. "We just have to keep our heads down until they pass. I'll call someone after that."

Grian still wasn't over the fact that there had been a phone present during the earlier process, but he agreed that it was best to wait.

The two of them stayed still, sitting on the unsanitary pavement of the alley for several more minutes. They listened as the chaos of the fight grew louder, and eventually, they were able to make out jumbled shouts – one-liners from heroes and witty retorts from villains. It was impossible to tell who exactly was out there, but it was best not to get too familiar.

Grian had a baseline knowledge of the mainstream heroes and villains that collectively terrorized the city. While they were prominent topics of conversation amongst those on social media and most newscasters, he was typically too distracted by his job to care much. It wasn't often that they came near his neighborhood.

From what he could remember off the top of his head, there weren't many villains that were capable of causing so much audible trouble. The city obviously had its fair share of petty criminals fueled by audacity given to them by their powers, but if the heroes got wind of them, they were usually cleaned up fairly fast.

Grian never imagined he'd be in a position like this one, horrifyingly close to the action. It really was deafening and constant. Were he not

already sitting, his legs might've given out from the layer of fear that gripped his heart.

Finally, after ages, things seemed to stop. Grian frowned, glancing at his companion, but the stranger gave no indication that it was safe to speak yet. He almost took the initiative, but the noise of whirring stopped him.

"Eclipse and Boogeyman got away."

Grian's breath hitched as a new voice came from directly above them. It was feminine, but not one he recognized off the top of his head as either a hero or a villain. Slowly, he let his eyes wander up. Grian had just enough time to train his gaze on a silhouette, before the stranger was grabbing his shoulder.

Without warning, a hand stifled his startled yelp, and he was twisted around to be pressed against the brick wall. Grian instinctively fought back, but the other pinned his legs under his own and hissed out, "Be *quiet,* dude!"

Grian remembered himself and their situation, forcing himself to calm. The stranger had crowded them into a corner between a handful of boxes and the building. With his larger frame hovering over Grian in this position, the minuscule amount of light that had been coming in was promptly stamped out. It was a little cramped, but they were officially as hidden in the shadows as they could possibly get.

The vet was impressed, and slightly worried about the sudden exertion on his patient's end. Not twenty minutes prior, Grian had finished his stitches. Throwing caution to the wind and maneuvering them both as he had contained the potential for serious consequences. If the man had twisted the wrong way even a bit while they were still so fresh, something could've come undone.

Grian wished he had light again — wished he could glimpse his work for half a second to assure all was right with it. Unfortunately, the situation didn't allow for that, and he was forced to silently stew over the chance of a malfunction.

Honestly, when nothing happened around them for several seconds, he debated just reaching up and checking if the bandages were bloody with his own two hands.

"Well, they can't have gone far."

Grian froze as a second person joined them overhead, this one a man. A shaky exhale left the stranger above him. He couldn't look to see anymore, but if these people were getting this reaction from his companion, the new arrivals definitely weren't welcome.

"I shot one of them earlier," came the woman again. She spoke with unwavering confidence, as if admitting to something like that was normal. "He fell somewhere down here, I think."

Grian's brows furrowed slowly.

She shot someone? Someone who fell? Was that referring to his patient?

"Ugh, that was ages ago," the man complained. "He's probably gotten away by now."

"I dunno. We got a lot of good hits at the beginning of the fight. He

was pretty out of it, even before the arrow," the woman said. Grian heard shuffling from above, and felt the man holding him tense. "Let's go check, I guess."

Check? *Check?* They were coming into the alleyway to check for the man they'd shot?

Grian's heart rate sped up so immediately that his vision swam and he became lightheaded. Being a few blocks from a villain was dangerous, but encountering one literally steps away was unheard of for him! He should run, hide, scream for help!

Except, he couldn't do any of those things, because the man was squeezing his shoulder and whispering, "Stay calm. Worst case scenario, I'll get *you* out alive, at least."

That was a stupidly *terrifying* worst case scenario. It did nothing to ease Grian's growing fear. Getting *just* him out alive? Leaving the implication open that one of them might not? And the vet was supposed to be alright with that statement?

His ears caught on more shuffling, then two grunts from somewhere on his level as people landed against concrete. There was a click, and a sliver of light made itself known. Over the stranger's shoulder, he could tell the two newcomers had dropped down by the mouth of the alleyway. Their flashlight's beam wasn't the most effective, but it illuminated enough to be worrisome.

Grian couldn't even shiver from the weight of all that was stirring within him. This was a nightmare from start to finish. Why hadn't he simply stayed at work when his coworkers made the suggestion? Why did he have to get himself caught up in this mess? What did he do to deserve this?

The light drew nearer and nearer. Both Grian and the stranger held their breaths. It was closer now, almost reaching around the corner of a dumpster and shining upon them. Their perfect shadowy cover would be useless soon.

“Oh, wait! Look at this!”

The flashlight’s beam stopped and turned away from them. Grian frowned, confused.

“Oh,” the woman gasped. “That’s my arrow! He got it out in one piece? The arrowhead is designed to break off if anyone tries to yank it.”

Grian’s mind jerked to the projectile he’d thrown aside after his emergency surgery. So, they’d found it. Tossing it had been an action done mostly unconsciously to prevent either of them from stepping on it in the dark. Now, he worried it might alert them to their presence.

“It’s been wiped off too,” she observed. “There goes that DNA sample.”

“Clever. We shouldn’t have underestimated him,” the man replied, solemn. “He got away after all that effort.”

“Sucks,” the woman said. “We were so close.”

“Bad luck,” replied her companion. “C’mon, we should go file our reports now.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I’ll call HQ.”

Grian listened to a dial tone start up, echoing off the walls.

“Headquarters, this is Slayer checking in,” the woman declared, footsteps starting up and the sound of her voice getting further and further away. “I’ve got Furioso with me. No sign of the Bamboozlers. They’re still evading capture. We’re on our way back.”

Grian strained to listen for longer, but he couldn’t past that point. Slowly, the information he’d absorbed in such rapid succession began to actually sink in.

HQ? Slayer? Furioso? Bamboozlers?

Those were all names Grian *recognized.*

Something was off about the whole situation. Why would the villains they’d been pointedly hiding from call into a supposed headquarters and refer to themselves by the aliases of the city’s two biggest heroes?

The man hovering over him leaned back, releasing Grian completely. Cold night air rushed in to fill the void.

“I guess it’s out in the open now,” the stranger hummed. “Shame. I wanted to avoid this.”

There was a loud sigh, and he watched the stranger's silhouette blindly reach around for something. Apparently, he found it by his old spot along the wall, because he lifted it to his face and wrapped stuff Grian couldn't see around his head.

A clicking sound, followed by a small hiss of pressurized air filled the silence, and a dull light was emitted from around the stranger's jaw. Grian could make out the details of what seemed to be a gas mask over his mouth. It wasn't like the gas masks he'd seen in the past, though. This one was smaller, highlighted by red and blue lights, and it seemed to be almost more for the sake of face coverage than anything else.

With the additional glow occupying the space between them, Grian was finally able to catch features that were lost in the prior darkness. His curiosity outweighed all else, and he drank them in greedily.

This man had his intense eyes trained directly on the vet, with wavy hair that fell slightly over his forehead, but was otherwise slicked back. His clothing was odd – a striped collared shirt left loosely unbuttoned, layered with a black vest, and a small hat upon his head. The fabric around his wound was still torn and ruined.

Something about the guy's appearance was familiar, like he'd seen it dozens of times before. His subconscious screamed at him, but it took far too long for him to hear it.

Grian remembered what the two mysterious figures had been talking about earlier. Flashes of their conversation came to him at once – *Eclipse, Boogeyman, shot one, he got away, Bamboozlers, evading capture.*

None of those were phrases usually uttered about a random civilian. They felt more like something one would hear in reference to a villain.

Grian sucked in a breath, alarms blaring in his mind.

Suddenly, the outfit made sense. Suddenly, falling off a roof and landing without breaking a bone made sense. Suddenly, the superpowers and high pain tolerance and hiding from people who didn't appear to be evil made *sense*.

This man wasn't a civilian, wasn't even a hero.

He was a *villain*.

And if the other people had actually been Slayer and Furioso as they'd claimed, then this was not just any villain either. He was part of the most dangerous trio in the entire city – one of the infamous Bamboozlers.

According to Slayer's report, all three had escaped, but Eclipse and Boogeyman were not either of the two that had been shot. That left one singular person as a possibility.

With his newfound context, Grian couldn't believe he hadn't recognized it earlier. There was only one person in the public eye that dressed like a twisted carnival worker, sported a gas mask over his lower half of his face, and wielded powers appearing in the form of a red glow.

"Ringmaster," Grian whispered.

The man – *Ringmaster* – let out a chilling laugh. The sound was

surrounded by an electric edge and with a distorted pitch from the vocal modulator located in his mask.

“Hello, Doctor,” he mused. “You were quite the help today.”

When Ringmaster spoke, it was distinctly different from the normal voice he’d heard previously. This was fit for television, dramatic speeches, and thrown threats.

There was an incomprehensible change between the man he’d stitched up a few minutes ago and the ominous figure in front of him. The scent of blood haunting the alleyway became less like the leftovers of a procedure and more like a forewarning of what was to come. The emptiness of the streets beyond the alleyway didn’t only mean a lack of help for someone else, but him as well. No one would hear him if he screamed.

Grian pressed himself as far into the wall as he could get, until the bricks scraped at his back through his scrubs and there was nowhere else to go.

Mustering up what little confidence he could, Grian asked, “Are you going to kill me now?”

“Kill you? No, no,” Ringmaster said, huffing. Grian saw his eyes crinkle as though he were smiling. “I just said you were helpful, didn’t I? No reason to kill you.”

Grian breathed a sigh of relief, probably a bit too early.

“Unless,” he heard the other start. There was a pause, and Ringmaster

leaned a few inches closer. “You wouldn’t have happened to catch a glimpse of my face, would you?”

“What?” Grian’s heart hammered in his chest. Frantically, he shook his head. “No, not even a little bit! I was too focused on your injury.”

He hoped the desperation that dripped from his lips wouldn’t have the opposite effect and put him in danger. Grian truly hadn’t seen anything, hadn’t even really tried very hard. Still, if a villain had reason to suspect a civilian knew his secret identity, then that created a motive to kill. Grian was extremely *not okay* with the idea of being exploited for his skills and murdered shortly after.

Thankfully, Ringmaster leaned back again, seemingly content. “Good,” he said. “In that case, you have nothing to worry about. Not right now, at least.”

No part of the way he spoke calmed Grian down. He wouldn’t so much as *think* about relaxing until he was tucked under the covers of his bed with every window and door in his apartment firmly locked. Even at that point, he was certain he’d be paranoid for the foreseeable future.

The villain raised his wrist to his mouth, and Grian noticed a regular-looking watch there for the first time.

“Eclipse, it’s me,” Ringmaster said. There was a faint buzzing, and Grian saw him tap an earpiece a few times. “I’ve sent you my location. I need to be picked up.”

The buzzing returned for a few seconds. While it was there, Ringmaster hummed and nodded along.

“Yeah, I did get shot,” he said. “No, I’m fine actually. I’ll tell you all about it in a second.”

He’s on the phone with someone, Grian realized. *Eclipse — one of the other Bamboozlers.*

Grian swallowed past a lump in his throat. If this man was calling in reinforcements, that meant he would not only be subjecting the vet to his own threatening presence, but likely the rest of the members of the notorious trio as well. That was more than a nondescript civilian should’ve ever had to withstand.

Ringmaster muttered a few more things, before lowering the watch and returning his eyes to Grian.

“My friends will be here soon,” he told the vet. “Got any other words of parting medical wisdom for me? Anything I should know about these handy little stitches?”

Medical information — Grian could talk about that. Whether shaking in fear or doing his job as normal, this stuff existed on autopilot for him. Realistically, though, was it something he *should* give out? Perhaps he could claim ignorance for his initial assistance, but knowingly continuing to help a criminal could put him in harm’s way, couldn’t it? Was he in more danger if he spoke up or if he stayed silent?

Mulling over it for a second longer, Grian eventually relented, “Well, you should keep it clean and change your bandages often for the next few days. The stitches and sutures themselves should absorb into your body or flake off in roughly two weeks. Depends on how you’re healing.”

“Oh, you know your stuff,” Ringmaster chuckled. He propped his chin in his hand. “You fix up guys in alleyways often, or is this a new hobby for you?”

His tone was light, joking, but his voice modulator still pricked Grian’s nerves with anxiety. It was a funny comment when removed from the situation’s context, and yet the vet couldn’t bring himself to even smile. Noticing this, the crinkle around the villain’s eyes lessened slightly.

Grian sat up straighter and cleared his throat. “You were just… lucky that I was walking by.”

“So it would seem,” Ringmaster muttered.

Grian heard him take a breath, like he was going to say something more, but both of them stopped as a distant whirring sound came into audible range.

Suddenly, a grappling hook shot out and caught on the roof over their heads. A figure swooped in after it, landing gracefully a few feet from them.

Ringmaster brightened at the sight. “Eclipse! Over here!”

A flashlight beam blinded them both as a woman’s voice, also distorted by a modulator, cut through the silence, “Ringmaster! Are you okay? We saw you fall off the building, but we couldn’t reach you–”

She stopped dead when Grian was also illuminated.

“Well, well, well!” Her shoulders rolled back, and her countenance changed. “You didn’t mention it was a two-for-one deal over the comms.”

“Yeah, who is this guy?”

Grian startled as a man materialized directly next to him. “How did you—?”

“Invisibility, *duh,”* the man replied, like it was obvious. “Don’t you know who I am?”

Grian blinked away dark spots and leftover shadows from his eyes to take in the newcomers better. They both wore outfits similar to Ringmaster — adorned in the same colors of red, blue, and black, with matching hats, suspenders, and gas masks too.

He *did* recognize these people, especially when all three of them were together. They were the Bamboozlers, with Ringmaster being the guy he’d helped, leaving Eclipse and Boogeyman as the two that had just arrived. In that context, invisibility as a simple explanation for the man’s sudden appearance wasn’t so far fetched.

No longer having the safeguard of darkness, Grian forced himself to deadpan, revealing nothing about his inner panicking. Villains were twisted people, and these were some of the fiercest of them. Should they pick up on how deeply he feared them, they’d likely worsen their antagonizing.

Grian worked to untie the knot in his stomach by pretending that this was just a group of three stray dogs with attitude problems. As long as he didn't seem like a threat or a chew toy, there was a chance for survival.

"This, my friends, is the guy that saved me," Ringmaster declared, loud and boisterous. "Stitched me up and everything, right in this alleyway! I am practically good as new!"

To prove his point, Ringmaster made a big gesture down to his side, still bandaged and thankfully not bleeding. Though, with the way he was acting, that wasn't likely to remain true for long.

"Careful," Grian hissed without thinking. "Too many large movements might open it up again. Take it easy."

Silence followed his words, and Grian glanced around to meet three pairs of disbelieving eyes.

Ah, he realized. *Just talked back to a supervillain. Not good.*

Instead of hostility, however, he was hit with a bout of shocked laughter from Ringmaster. "Sorry, Doctor, sorry," he wheezed. "I'll relax! Don't burst a blood vessel."

Eclipse and Boogeyman looked as appalled by their teammate's demeanor as Grian felt. Eclipse took a step forward nervously. "Uh, did you conk your head? What's so funny?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really," Ringmaster answered, gradually calming again. "It's just… He was so nervous a second ago, and now he's being

snappy with me. It's interesting."

Grian thought it was interesting too. Switching up that quickly between work mode and fearing for his life was not normal. He hypothesized that it might have to do with the very long shift he'd only recently finished prior to this entire debacle. He was running on fumes previously, and as he sat amongst a crowd of villains after performing emergency surgery, Grian wasn't sure if even that much remained.

"Anyway," Eclipse sighed, urging them along. *"Why* exactly did this stranger save you?"

Her eyes turned to him, bright blue and menacing.

"Are you trying to get some sort of favor out of us? Because that won't work," she said, jaw clenched. The woman removed a short stick from her belt, but upon pressing a button near the bottom, it rapidly extended. Grian bit back a scream at the sight of her signature spear, still stained with blood from her earlier fight. "We *could* just kill you right here."

Grian held up his hands in defense, but he wasn't given a chance to speak. Ringmaster stepped in first. "Calm down. He didn't know who I was when he helped me out."

"I don't trust it," Boogeyman chimed in. "Maybe it's a trick."

"Yeah, we should take him back to the Bam Bunker for further questioning," Eclipse agreed. Ringmaster shot her a dirty look, but she just folded her hands in front of her. "Please? Only a little bit of torture?"

Grian's guard raised as high as it could possibly go. Unconsciously, his gaze drifted over to the closest thing to a safety line he currently had amidst the strange company: Ringmaster. The guy was a villain, but he was the only one that owed Grian anything, and the only one that might be able to hold off his bloodthirsty companions.

To his surprise, Ringmaster was already watching him, eyes thick with amusement.

He thought this was *funny*.

Grian shivered, and scrunched his nose briefly – just enough that this one man would notice, but the other two would not. Ringmaster snorted, letting the vet know that the slight had been communicated.

"No, Eclipse," Ringmaster sighed. "He didn't see my face or anything, so he's not a threat. It's a waste of energy."

"Party pooper," Boogeyman grumbled, still uncomfortably close to Grian. Thankfully, he tipped backwards and hopped to his feet, stretching over his head. "Alright, well, you needed help getting out of here, right? Let's go, then."

Ringmaster extended a hand. Grian winced as the villain's teammates yanked him up without any amount of thought given to his side. Evidently, it was felt. Ringmaster cursed quietly, and his hand shot to his bandages.

Grian waited to see red, waited for the agony to return, waited to see his hard work wasted by carelessness. It was a relief when it did not come. Ringmaster tossed him a sheepish glance. "Sorry, Doctor. I'll do

better… Starting now.”

The vet did not reply, figuring it best not to give the villains any reasons to linger for longer in his general vicinity. No one urged him into it, at least. They had taken to, now that Ringmaster was on his feet and able to shuffle this way and that, whispering amongst themselves.

Grian stayed still, knees raised to his chest as he tried to melt into the corner. He wanted to be forgotten. Unfortunately, though, he hadn’t been getting what he wanted recently.

Ringmaster turned to him a moment later.

“We’re going to head out now, Doctor,” he said. “Get home safely, and try not to call the police, yeah? We’ll know if you do.”

Grian nodded vehemently, taking the threat at face value. Whether it was the truth or not, he wasn’t planning on finding out. Besides, what could the cops do that the heroes had not failed to do a hundred times over?

Content with his agreement, Ringmaster straightened, and gave his attention back to his team.

“Let’s go. Cover my flank,” he spoke, suddenly stern. “No large movements if it can be helped. This is going to be a long walk.”

Grian remained firmly in place until the retreating forms of the three villains had completely left his view, and then collapsed in on himself. Were he not so tired, there might’ve even been tears of relief.

He wasn’t dead. Maybe miracles really did exist.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading the first chapter! I really hope you enjoyed!

I currently plan to release a chapter every week to the best of my ability. I've already pre-written 70k words, so it should be solidly possible!

Thanks especially to my two beta readers, Cody and Smiif, the latter of which helped me double check a lot of the medical things. I couldn't have done it without them, and some of my favorite parts of this fic came about with their help!

I'll see you guys next week for the second chapter!

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miracles did not exist.

Fundamentally — on the basis that they were interventions by some higher power for the benefit of one specific party — miracles were not real. They absolutely couldn't be. Grian hadn't been sure of it before, but the dawning of a new day had changed his mind.

It'd started off rather unremarkable.

On the second morning since he'd accidentally aided a criminal in an alleyway, Grian woke up with a crick in his neck. It was irritating, but there was nothing much to be done about it. At the very least, he knew it wouldn't bother him at work. Grian called out sick the second he got home from his eventful evening, and hadn't left the house since.

It wasn't hard to figure out how he'd gotten the crick in his neck. He'd fallen asleep in an armchair in his living room, positioned strategically to face both the main windows and the door of his tiny apartment. Daylight hours hadn't been as stressful for him, but once night fell, Grian hadn't been able to do anything but worry.

Sheer exhaustion had been all that knocked him out for the last two evenings. Had he been capable of it, he would've almost certainly stayed up. Sleep made him vulnerable. He wanted to be able to see any who might try to enter his apartment.

And, yes, the villains had left him alone last time, but those people didn't play fair. It was completely possible that they would change their minds, track him down, and end him before he had a chance to scream for help.

Saving one of them gave him a bit of an advantage compared to what another poor passerby might've earned, and yet still, there wasn't any genuine stability in that idea. Moral advantages could only be truly upheld if both parties believed in them. How could a group known for their tyranny be trusted to honor morals?

Ringmaster spared him once — he had no obligation to do it a second time.

It was a struggle to pry Maui and Pearl off his legs, where they'd decided to make their beds last night. On his way out of the living room and into the kitchen, he kicked his work bag to the side. It had been resting in the same spot since his shaking hands had dropped it initially, and it was in the way. Grian mustered what little energy he had left to tuck it into the coat closet by the front door.

He took a heat pack out of his kitchen's miscellaneous drawer, intent on at least easing his agitation a bit with its help. The crick in his neck sent dull, consistent pains through his body as he watched the pack spin in the microwave for a minute. Painkillers would be good too, but before he could take any, he'd need to put some food in his stomach.

Eating as a concept sounded pleasant, and Grian was actually quite hungry. However, persistent nausea occupied his gut recently. Once his heat pack was ready and balanced awkwardly upon his shoulder, he debated if making breakfast was worth it.

He fed his cats, the two winding through his legs and chirping at him

all the while. Toast was what he ultimately decided upon for himself. It was quick, wouldn't waste too many ingredients should he grow weary half a bite in, and there wouldn't be any extreme flavors to further upset his stomach. He ended up eating about a quarter, just enough to justify popping a couple of pills.

Up until that point, the morning contained nothing of note. His plans for the day included feeling guilty about not going into work, and being filled with a looming sense of dread.

Unfortunately, that *riveting* schedule was flipped on his head the second he returned to the living room and found that it was not as he'd left it.

Grian's eyes landed on the open window, his curtains rustling in the wind. His heart dropped. Slowly, he let his gaze wander to his couch, where an unwelcome guest had made himself at home.

Ringmaster waved at him. "Morning, Doctor."

Grian turned and walked back into the kitchen.

It was too early for this. He hadn't even had a single sip of tea yet, and now he was expected to deal with the city's most wanted criminal. There was simply no way that was going to work out for anyone involved.

He heard an offended gasp from behind him, and a hasty shuffling, but didn't dare look over his shoulder.

Grian took off his heat pack and threw it aside, resigned to the

knowledge that a simple neck ache might be the least amount of pain he would feel that day. The vet dragged himself over to the stove, and grabbed the kettle. He filled it with water and turned on the flame, letting it sit. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pearl and Maui sprint from the room, food half eaten, at the sight of the unwanted guest. His foot tapped impatiently against the ground while he waited.

“Um, hello? Doctor?”

Grian’s nails dug into his palms, and he was forced to shove them in the pockets of his sweatpants to hide his inner turmoil. He sighed, finally facing the villain again. The true terror of the situation hadn’t totally sunk in yet, so his mind allowed him a few liberties when it came to digesting the sight of the villain.

Ringmaster looked a little ridiculous standing in the middle of his kitchen in broad daylight with his hands on his hips. Contrasting to the pale yellow paint of his walls, the darkened shades of scarlets, blues, and blacks were horrendously out of place. A dingy alleyway suited this guy far better than the vibes of some random apartment.

His brows were furrowed, and the sunlight streaming in allowed the vet to see that his guest sported a pair of abnormally-lovely green eyes. They weren’t crinkled at the moment, indicating a distinct lack of the smile he’d worn during their last meeting. Beyond that, amongst the details that were newly revealed came a collection of scars.

Discolored and stretched patches were scattered across most revealed skin. His face was the exception for the most part. Though even then, Grian saw a knick in his eyebrow, and right above where the gas mask covered, there was the start of what he assumed to be another large mark. If he had any more, they were hidden from view.

Grian's curiosity compelled him to glance down towards where he knew Ringmaster's wound to be.

The fabric of his vest had been mended, meaning nothing of the other night's issues were visible. Part of him wanted to request to see it – just to check how it was healing and if he'd done everything right before. Presumably, he had, but the light level left a lot to be desired with his recollection of the evening.

To prevent himself from blurting anything unwise, Grian spoke the first question that came to mind.

"Why are you here?"

Ringmaster's furrowed brows moved impossibly closer, and there was a moment in which Grian wondered if he'd taken it too far earlier. Whether he'd completed his morning ritual of drinking tea yet or not, walking out on a villain was a bit of a bad call. Thankfully, he wasn't made to suffer in silence for long.

"You're smart," Ringmaster sighed. "I'm sure you know why I'm here."

Grian thought about it. There was really only one valid answer. "To kill me, right?"

Despite his certainty, Ringmaster appeared completely appalled by his words.

"What? Kill you? No," he scoffed. "Why would I be here to kill you?"

“I don’t know,” Grian muttered, returning to tapping his foot against the ground. “You’re evil, aren’t you?”

“Well, I mean,” Ringmaster sputtered. “Yeah, I *guess.”*

“Alright. Then, if you’re *not* here to kill me,” Grian moved along. “Why did you break into my house this morning? I assume it’s not for a cup of tea.”

“Because of your tools,” Ringmaster said, eyes wide like it was obvious. Grian paused, processing. The villain, noticing his momentary confusion, elaborated, “You have my blood samples. I’m here to take that away so the police can’t DNA match me.”

It clicked in Grian’s head the second Ringmaster brought it up. The heroes had mentioned that same concept the first time he met the villain – complaining about the arrow having been wiped off and made useless.

His thoughts went to his bag, tucked into his closet with everything from that night. He hadn’t cleaned anything off, though the medical professional in him knew it to be a hazard. Having called out of work two days in a row, it wasn’t possible to access the autoclave to properly sterilize them.

It wasn’t done with any intention, like reporting his situation to the police. Rather, he’d involuntarily put it off due to his own anxieties. In all likelihood, he probably would’ve subtly used the autoclave the next time he was at the clinic without much of a thought given towards DNA samples.

He’d already thrown his scrubs and cloths in the wash with a bit of hydrogen peroxide to remove the stains. However, with the dawning

of this new issue, reality was impossible to ignore. He hadn't cleaned his *tools,* so the blood *was* still on them. It was evidence that a professional villain really wouldn't want floating around.

"I know you've not gone to the police already," Ringmaster said. "So, before you *do,* I'm going to have to confiscate that stuff."

"What?" Grian stood up straighter, hands leaving his pockets. "What do you mean? You want to take my tools away?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said," Ringmaster confirmed. "I have to. Safety's important!"

"No," Grian replied.

Ringmaster raised a brow. "No?"

"Absolutely not," Grian continued, even as the back-and-forth sat like a stone in his gut. He was pushing his luck, but this was not a matter that he could just allow to happen. "Do you know how much it would cost to replace all of that?"

Ringmaster blinked. "I don't really *care—"*

"Too much," Grian said. "I'd rather you cut off my hand at that point."

He regretted the statement as soon as it was out. The villain's gaze seemed to darken with the mere suggestion. Cold, hard terror replaced the beating of Grian's heart. He held up a finger, trying his best to

appear unphased. The other man stared at it as though he wanted to rip it off.

"That was *not* a request," he said, suddenly nervous. The morning haze that had given him a façade of confidence faded all at once. "Either way, I won't be giving up those tools. You'll just have to trust that I won't use them against you."

"Trust?" Ringmaster's head tilted to the side. Grian didn't like the glint in his eye. "You want *me* to trust *you?"*

The vet lowered his pointed finger, mouth dry. Ringmaster took a step closer, taller than Grian remembered him being.

"You might have saved my life once," the villain hummed. He swayed nearer, leaning down ever so slightly to bring him to Grian's level. "But we both know that was only because my identity was obscured."

He raised a hand and let it ghost over the vet's arm, trailing up to his shoulder. It paused, hovering ominously by his neck. Ringmaster settled his hand there, in the crook between shoulder and throat. The villain squeezed a bit too tightly, inadvertently aggravating the already-existing ache.

"Of all people, Doctor," he whispered. "I'm sure you understand the fear of having something… come back to bite you."

Grian swallowed. The villain's thumb rose to trace over the bobbing motion.

"You know," Ringmaster said. "I wasn't *planning* on killing you, but

this really is getting irritating."

Grian glared as the villain's hand rose to tip his chin up.

"Yeah, I should just go through with it," the villain mused. "Not like it'd be hard."

Grian backed up as far as he could, pushing away the touch. The counter stopped further movement. There was less than a foot of distance between him and the man threatening him – not nearly enough space. Ringmaster reached out like he might grab Grian's wrist. To prevent any further contact, he folded his arms behind his back.

Ringmaster matched his glare. "Interesting."

The vet swallowed, and once again, green eyes followed the movement. The attention felt dangerous, loaded, anticipatory. It weighed upon Grian's shoulders and gripped at his lungs.

Slowly, Ringmaster took a step closer. Something about his attitude had changed – become more serious. Grian hadn't thought he was teasing before, but compared to his current countenance, there was no doubt in his mind that he was in genuine danger.

The villain raised another hand, and this time Grian wasn't able to knock it away. It latched onto his throat, his grip not yet choking, but certainly not gentle either. The fear that shot through the vet's veins was hot and acidic. His entire body screamed at him to move, fight, do anything.

Without thinking, Grian's hand shot out to the countertop beyond him, where he knew his larger utensils were kept. His fingers curled around a handle, and then he was shoving it forward, stabbing it towards the other's neck.

Unfortunately for him, he hadn't been quick enough. His wrist was enveloped by a red glowing light. It prickled along his skin, forcing him to pause mid-thrust. The very air around his appendage felt *wrong,* like he'd been caught in a jar of gelatine.

Ringmaster raised a brow. "A stirring spoon? Really?"

Grian cried out as the other took his wrist and twisted, causing him to lose his hold. The spoon clattered to the ground, and the villain laughed. The sound bounced off the walls of his kitchen, domineering and cold.

"I see that I might've underestimated your willingness to fight back."

The red glow dissipated, but he wasn't given time to feel relieved. Without warning, Ringmaster crowded impossibly closer. Grian held his breath as arms bracketed him in on either side, and he leaned in close enough for the vet to see the flecks of yellow in his eyes.

"Now, Doctor, there's nowhere for you to go," he said, tone purring with the ebb and flow of his vocal modulator. "Are you *sure* you still want to be stubborn?"

Their bodies were pressed together, pinning Grian in place. He could feel the other's chest against his, a hammering pulse competing with one set in a chillingly calm rhythm. He could see the other's arms, and the strength that would be certain to prevent any escape attempts. He could see the other's brow raise just the slightest bit, visibly both

amused and irritated by the game of cat and mouse they were playing.

Grian couldn't respond. His tongue was leaden inside his mouth, his breathing shallow, and his heart rate an undeniable mess. No thoughts could take root in his mind, not when terror had replaced his reason.

Never once in his life had he thought he'd wind up in this position – a supervillain threatening him within his own home over a set of tools. How was he supposed to get out of this unscathed?

"Doctor?" The other tilted his head, eyes half-lidded. "I asked you a question."

A shiver trailed up Grian's spine. "I don't…"

"You don't—?"

"I don't want to give you my tools," Grian said, almost inaudible. He heard himself only through a ringing in his ears. Something came to him in a brief flash, an idea that might mend their difficult situation. "Can't we… strike a deal?"

Ringmaster hummed, "A deal?"

Grian felt the rumbling words in his chest, latching onto them like an anchor. The vet thought they came with a hint of intrigue – the kind that might put him in a favorable position. For the sake of survival, he needed anything he could get.

“Yes, a deal,” he confirmed. His brain rushed to catch up with his mouth as he said, “You want my tools because they have your blood on them, yeah? What if I just wash them off?”

The villain tutted. “I’ve already told you that I don’t *trust*—“

“You don’t have to trust me.” Grian’s breath came back to him, sureness filling him more and more by the second. “I’ll wash them off in the sink. Right now. And you can watch.”

Ringmaster, for the first time since he’d let his more sinister side shine through, seemed to need a moment to process. He drew in an audible breath.

A sharp whistling cut through the air, startling both of them. Ringmaster stumbled back a step or two, whatever he’d been about to say lost in the confusion. Cold air rushed to fill the space where they’d been pressed together. Grian cursed, and jumped to deal with his kettle.

Despite the inopportune timing, he moved on autopilot to collect the various items he needed. Black tea was his usual first drink in the morning. It helped him start his day, and while he’d already had quite the start, habits were hard to break.

Grian stopped short at his cup cabinet. He hesitated between grabbing just one, or adding an extra to his run. Though it wasn’t necessarily *smart,* he decided to outsource his dilemma.

“Do you want a cup?”

He chanced a look over his shoulder, and saw that Ringmaster's countenance had resumed its earlier confusion. "Do I want… a cup of tea?"

It was stupid. The tea was stupid. Grian was being stupid. Going from being threatened one minute to offering tea the next was especially stupid. One of these idiotic questions or statements he kept blurting were going to get him killed eventually. Only a matter of time.

Unable to do anything else, he doubled down, "Yes."

"Um," Ringmaster mumbled. "Sure?"

Grian grabbed a second cup. He went about pouring the water, adding the tea bags and leaving them to steep for about four or so minutes. It was then, in that awkward moment between having something to do and not, that he decided to take matters into his own hands.

The vet left the kitchen, with the villain making a noise of confusion as he walked. He stopped by the closet, freed his bag, and returned. He pulled everything out and spread it along the countertop, including both the clean and used tools.

"I'll wash and scrub these all right now, so long as you promise not to take them from me after that," Grian announced, glancing back at the villain. He hoped he appeared calm, because inwardly he was still extremely shaky. "Sound like a good deal?"

Ringmaster hesitated. "I don't know… Does blood actually just wash off with soap and water? You're not, like, tricking me somehow, are you?"

Grian shook his head.

There was a brief second of silence, before the villain sighed, “Alright.”

Relief flooded through Grian, and he was pretty sure he slumped against the counter a bit as his legs gave out. Thankfully, he was able to quickly recover, and transfer those that needed to be washed to the sink. Mindlessly, he set all but one tool down on the side of the tap and began.

Ringmaster hovered over his shoulder, watching intently through furrowed brows. The water turned pink as dried blood was scraped away and replaced with suds by the sponge. It wasn’t terribly efficient, as an old toothbrush might’ve been more suited for the job, but he didn’t have great options around his apartment. Grian washed with a practiced speed anyway, used to this meticulous action – though it wasn’t normally done in his home.

“What are these letters on the handles?”

Grian glanced over to see his tools being inspected by the villain. “My initials, since these are my personal instruments. A lot of vets engrave their own stuff.”

“Hm,” Ringmaster said, adding under his breath, “I guess I see why you might not want to lose them.”

Grian decided to take that as his one win of the day, and carried on.

As he finished washing, he put the washed tools in the drying rack.

Sanitizing and fully sterilizing would be done once he had access to the proper cleaning supplies and the autoclave at work. They weren't up to the clinic's standards until then.

The whole process was fairly fast, given that only a handful of instruments had been utilized two days prior. It was the perfect amount of time to kill while waiting on the tea.

He took out the bags and sipped his cup to check if it was ready, and decided that to be the case. The black tea's rich flavor rolled over his tongue, solidifying into clarity and energy within his brain. Grian enjoyed the depth of the taste, however, he recognized that his guest might be less inclined to enjoy something that a lot of people considered to be bitter.

The vet grabbed a spoonful of sugar and mixed it into the second cup, before passing it to Ringmaster. Perhaps the added sweetness would tamp down any ugly feelings the villain still held towards him. Having only just reached a consensus, Grian figured it was good to have contingency plans, however superficial they might be.

The villain stared down at the cup, brows furrowed and a baffled tint to his gaze. He looked between Grian and the drink several times, before he voiced something the vet had not considered.

"I can't drink this with my mask on."

Grian frowned, silence falling on the room.

"Oh. Right."

So much for gathering whatever favor he could from the guy.

“Sorry,” Grian said, though he couldn’t fix the situation. He took a remorseful sip.

“No, it’s my fault,” Ringmaster replied, shaking his head. Awkwardly, he reached past Grian to set the tea down again. “I just… should’ve considered that before, uh, accepting.”

His switch-up was disorienting. The vet knew he was partially to blame for the sudden changing of stakes, but to see someone shift as Ringmaster had in the last few minutes was hard to fully comprehend. Grian didn’t understand how one could go from threatening another’s life to acting embarrassed about not drinking tea so immediately.

Uncomfortable quiet filtered in around them, interrupted only by the slight clinking of Grian’s cup against its saucer every now and again.

“Anyway, um,” Ringmaster began. “Your tools… They’re totally clean?”

“Yes,” Grian assured him. “I’ll sterilize them completely at the clinic, but if the police were to test them right now, nothing would be found.”

Of course, Grian didn’t tell him that this was mindless speculation.

With the existence of superpowers, it was impossible to predict what the Agency and the police department had under their belt when it came to tracking down criminals. They could have contacts that could turn back time on certain items, or pick up on microscopic spots that

were missed. Maybe soap and water *weren't* enough alone to get rid of all of the bacteria in this day and age.

But he was fairly confident it would get the villain off his case at least. Grian didn't need to dwell on the specifics of forensics for a matter like this.

Ringmaster took a deep breath and muttered something. Grian frowned, leaning closer. "What was that?"

"I'm sorry," Ringmaster blurted, squeezing his eyes shut. "I probably should've suggested we just do *that* from the start instead of…"

He trailed off, and over the top of his gas mask, the vet thought he could see a spreading blush. Grian finished his sentence for him, "Threatening to kill me?"

"Yes, that," Ringmaster said, sheepish. "Sorry about that."

Grian nodded and took another sip of his drink. He didn't outwardly accept the apology, though. It'd take a lot more from the guy to earn any sort of forgiveness after the sheer amount of back-to-back heart attacks he'd been given.

If Ringmaster was bothered by this, or if he even noticed, he didn't say anything. Consolation and reconciliation seemed less necessary to him than just the act of getting the apology out.

When silence settled on them again, the villain cleared his throat and started towards the open window in Grian's living room. Grian followed him half-heartedly, watching him go. He'd be installing

different locks onto every possible entrance the second this guy left.

Ringmaster swung one foot out, but paused in that odd position to look over his shoulder. “By the way, um, thank you.”

Grian glanced up at him, surprised. “Thank you? For what?”

“For saving me the other day,” Ringmaster specified. “I never said anything, but without you, I would’ve probably been caught.”

“No,” Grian argued, scoffing. “You had a way to call your teammates. They would’ve been able to come and get you, I’m sure.”

“They were still fighting when I was knocked out,” Ringmaster said. “And even if they could’ve come to get me, the heroes didn’t vacate the area until they thought I was gone. Superpowered or not, it’d be difficult for my friends to fight them off *and* get me to safety.”

Grian pursed his lips. He knew the villain was likely telling the truth. His story added up, and his eyes didn’t look guilty at all. At this moment, with no one else watching and a tentative understanding between them, Ringmaster didn’t have a reason to lie about the events that had already occurred.

Still, it felt like a trap. To be given his apology and his thanks in such a short span of time *had* to be a trap. Maybe Ringmaster was trying to lure him into something, waiting for verbal confirmation that it was alright and Grian didn't mind the fact that he’d accidentally aided a criminal, so he could be turned over to the cops himself.

Instead of letting his fears win, he found a compromise, and nodded.

The villain was appeased, and in the next second, he was gone. Grian glanced out the nearest window to see if he could catch a glimpse of Ringmaster leaving, but there was nothing besides empty air beneath him.

For the second time, Grian had escaped a personal encounter with the city's most wanted villain and lived to tell the tale.

That evening, he slept in his own bed, woken only twice by nightmares.

In those moments where rest was impossible, he let himself search up new home security systems. Upon discovering that most systems were egregiously expensive, and not nearly enough to keep out an intruder that *really* wanted in, he'd turned back over and fallen asleep again. The villains had no reason to come back, so Grian opted not to stress himself over nothing.

The next morning, when he arrived at work, he went through the proper process of sanitizing his tools and putting them in the autoclave. One of the clinic's other vets, Skizz, pulled him aside once he was done.

"Whatcha doing, bud? What's up with your stuff?" Skizz inquired, "I thought you'd been sick these last few days? You weren't doing house calls still, were you?"

From anyone else, it might've been delivered with a bit of attitude and come across as invasive questioning, but Grian knew the other man well. He was a softy at heart, with no hidden motives, which was what made him so good at his job. Skizz was sincerely curious as to why his coworker's instruments were dirtied when he'd left with them perfectly clean before.

“Nah, Skizz, don’t worry,” Grian replied, shooting him a smile. “I found a stray on the side of the road, just thought I’d help it get back on its feet. That’s all.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for all the support and love on the first chapter! I wasn't expecting the absolute wave of love for this fic, and it really made my week infinitely better <3

As a thank you gift, and to apologize for delivering a chapter that is under my usual 5k word mark, I'll be updating a second time this week as well. Expect to see Chapter 3 in about two days, once I've finished editing and preparing it for your eyes! That one is about 8k words, so I think it's a decent gift :)

Much love as always to my beautiful beta readers, Cody and Smiif, whom I can do nothing without.

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> As promised, here's Chapter 3 posted a couple days early! Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mumbo,” Grian sighed. “I have to go. You can handle this by yourself.”

“Grian! *No,”* the other vet whined. He was leaning all the way back in his office chair, gripping onto Grian’s sleeve like the world would end if he left Mumbo’s vicinity. “I can’t talk to her!”

“Yes, you can,” Grian argued, but he was smiling. “She’s perfectly polite.”

“Maybe around you,” Mumbo muttered. “Last time I helped her, she yelled at me for thirty minutes because she didn’t believe that the kitten she just adopted was male!”

“Oh, yeah,” Grian gasped. “You told me about that. I nearly forgot. She won’t be that insufferable again, right? Surely not. You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t care,” Mumbo said. “Don’t leave me alone with her!”

“I *have* to go. My shift’s over,” Grian replied. Gently, he pulled himself out of Mumbo’s freakishly-long reach. His friend groaned, mouth dropping into a deep frown. It was clearly meant to garner sympathy. Grian waved, and left the room. “Goodbye, Mumbo.”

“Ugh,” Mumbo called after him. “Bye, love you!”

“Love you too!”

Grian exited the clinic into the late afternoon sun, blinking away spots at the sudden brightness. He’d been at work for the better part of the early morning and into the day, which meant he was free to get some solid rest until his next shift tomorrow night.

For as much as Mumbo complained, business hadn’t exactly been booming recently. It was better that way – given less clients visiting the emergency clinic indicated that less pets were having emergencies – but it could make the hours a little boring.

Grian, admittedly, tended to entertain himself during those types of shifts by watching the way his best friend did his job.

Mumbo wasn’t a bad vet. Far from it, actually. He was probably more skilled and contained more textbook knowledge than both Grian and Skizz combined sometimes. Every bit of information that entered his skull stayed there indefinitely.

Maybe the playing field would’ve been balanced out a little bit if Mumbo struggled to put the methodology into practice. However, that was another place where he excelled. Grian knew his friend could always be counted on to easily find veins when drawing blood, measure out correct dosages without fail, and complete paperwork at record speed. It was not for any of these reasons that Mumbo made him laugh.

In fact, it was his social skills that caught Grian’s attention.

All the textbook knowledge and smarts in the world could not make Mumbo better at dealing with people. He could not begin to understand how best to handle difficult visitors, how to break bad news, or how to be firm when it was important for a person to listen to him.

Mumbo was just too nice. He didn't want to make a kid cry, or come across as forceful as he relayed instructions for easing a pet off an unhealthy diet. It was where he cracked. Grian took a sick amount of enjoyment from watching him bumble through interactions until he ultimately would ask for a coworker's help.

It was especially funny because he wasn't like that at all once he got to know a person. He was delightful, able to yell and make crude jokes on occasion. Rude comments often had to be coaxed out of him, but they certainly existed – and, well, Grian loved a challenge.

He basked in the sunlight while walking home. His commute wasn't long, a little over thirty minutes if he took his time, and Grian liked the exercise it gave him. It was only really inconvenient during his late shifts, or after an especially tiring day. Today was neither. It was quiet, warm, peaceful, and he wanted time to pass as slowly as possible.

An alert buzzed from where his phone had been shoved in his pocket. Grian fished it out, swiping it open with a vague half-interest. He raised the brightness of his screen enough to see the notification, and clicked on it.

He wasn't expecting to be taken to the news app – with a warning indicating an emergency in his vicinity.

Grian sucked in a breath, squeezing his phone and pausing on the sidewalk to read the exact details closer.

Stupid thing barely contained much more information than the report of a fight on a street not far from where he was. It didn't include the people involved, nor the ranking of danger.

The vet jerked his head up, spinning rapidly to see the reactions of the others on the street around him. None of them seemed particularly perturbed, even though several also had their phones open and would've seen the notification.

Having nowhere around that could be considered safe, and given everyone else's casual nature, Grian swallowed his worry and opted to keep walking. His home wasn't too much further, just a couple more blocks.

With every step, he scanned the horizon for indication of a scuffle. Several times, he almost bumped into another person because of his wandering gaze. Never once did Grian see a hint of fire, hear buildings exploding, see figures on any rooftops.

The atmosphere was uncomfortably relaxed for being allegedly close enough to a battle to warrant an alert. Maybe it was a false alarm – those could be sent out by accident if the reporters keeping tabs on the city's status had problems with their devices or couldn't keep close enough track of the directionality of an encounter.

Yeah, this was *probably* nothing. He was *probably* just being jumpy. Everything was *probably* fine. Grian didn't live in an area where this occurred often. Two alerts in a handful of days was rare, but it didn't mean the world was ending.

Before that night a week prior, he hadn't ever had the displeasure of ending up in the radius of a fight. It was a fluke when it finally *did*

happen too – unlucky, like lightning striking twice in the same area. Rare, but not impossible. There was nothing worth a villain's time here, only neighborhoods and small businesses.

Forcing himself to train his gaze on the ground, Grian had to repeat that over and over again to keep calm: No villains or heroes were ending up near him on purpose.

If it truly *was* as close to him as the alert said, they were likely long gone already. Heroes and villains moved fast, never remaining still for more than a few moments. Crossing the length of the city and passing through the area was probably the closest they would get to him.

He was so intensely focused on keeping himself calm that he was only drawn from his head by the first shrill scream from beside him. The sidewalks became a stampede all at once, civilians shoving and shouldering past one another to run back in the direction they'd come.

Dragging his eyes up to the sky, Grian's blood ran cold at the sight of two silhouettes framed by the sun, fighting atop a building not a block away from him.

Oh *no*.

Another loud noise erupted from the middle of the street. It was even closer to him, only a handful of abandoned car lengths away from where he stood. He could feel the ground shake from the impact, taste the rubble that flew up, and smell the thick scent of blood in the air.

Grian couldn't breathe, couldn't scream, couldn't muster the energy to run. He stumbled to the side, ducking into the nearest alley and poking his head out. Familiar fear flooded him, but all he could do was watch as one of the city's most infamous interactions unfolded

steps away from him.

The fight was happening. It was here. The alert was *right.*

And now, he no longer had to wonder about the individuals involved. He could see them clear as day.

Not that Grian needed an insane amount of details to put a face to a name. He would recognize those flashes of red and blue anywhere.

Though, it wasn't Ringmaster in front of him, exchanging thrown punches and stabbing thrusts with a hero clad in green and orange armor. Rather, it was Eclipse – the pink-haired member of the Bamboozlers, whose powers were capable of rendering an enemy blind for upwards of a minute during combat.

Despite how she'd been slammed into the concrete not a minute prior, she was already back on her feet. The hero, Slayer, was known for her skill. Eclipse kept up with her easily, ducking as a punch was thrown and swiping at her feet.

Grian stared in awe of her accuracy and fighting ability with her spear. Every time the villain struck out with it, the blade made contact. Had it not been for the hero's costume design being primarily heavy plating, she likely would've received several fatal blows already.

Beyond her, on the rooftop, Grian could make out the sight of another of the Bamboozlers. Judging by the lankiness and blonde hair, it was Boogeyman. He was engaged with Furioso, though that back and forth was hard to fully absorb.

Invisibility powers meant that a lot of the hero's time spent fighting Boogeyman was wasted trying to find him. Only when a blow landed did the villain get knocked into visibility again for a couple of seconds. He was not as outwardly skilled as Eclipse, just from the few seconds Grian could decipher, but his stealth abilities made up for whatever he lacked.

However, these were only two people out of the total three that made up the Bamboozlers. They were never apart, never moving as anything less than a complete group. Grian glanced around, involuntarily searching for a familiar face.

He found Ringmaster on the roof of another building. His frame was lowered, barely visible over the lip of the building. Undoubtedly, he was sneaking up on Furioso. Boogeyman remained in a stalemate dance with the blade-wielding hero, holding his attention solidly away from the approaching person.

Suddenly, Ringmaster pounced. He landed on Furioso's back, catching him in a chokehold. The hero strained and fought against him, with Boogeyman coming into visibility in front of him. There came a loud whooping cheer, presumably from the lankier villain.

Furioso struggled, trying everything from pulling at the arm around his throat to slashing out at Boogeyman whenever he attempted to lean in. Grian could hear his frustrated shouts from the street below. And if that could reach him, it certainly reached the hero's teammate.

Slayer, who had been stuck in a grapple with Eclipse, shoved backwards. She raised her arm, where her iconic crossbow was mounted to her armor. Her aim was known to be nearly perfect, and the sight of it alone seemed to alarm her opponent. A bolt was fired off, but not before Eclipse dove forward, knocking the hero's arm aside.

The projectile soared through the air and buried itself in the wall of the building uselessly. Despite not hitting anyone, the whistling sound worked to shock the three on the roof. Ringmaster and Boogeyman were distracted for long enough that Furioso was able to free himself.

He slipped under Ringmaster's arm, and then twisted around to grab the villain by his collar. Grian watched Furioso activate his high-jumping ability, bringing the two several feet up into the air. From there, he punched Ringmaster in the gut and released him, sending the guy plummeting towards the rooftop again.

Grian winced, preparing to hear the crash of the impact. But it never came.

Instead, a red glow overtook Ringmaster's body, slowing his form in mid-air. Boogeyman rushed over and tugged him gently back to the ground. Once the red glow dissipated, Ringmaster resumed moving around like nothing had happened.

Grian didn't know quite as much about Ringmaster's powers as he did Eclipse and Boogeyman. He'd done the most baseline amount of research after having his life threatened, though not much had come up.

The latter two were obvious enough to have several articles online detailing the known extents of their abilities, but an ominous red glow was ambiguous, even in the eyes of superpower experts. Reporters were fairly certain that Ringmaster had some sort of matter manipulation, though its limitations and exact specifics were heavily argued.

Either way, whatever he'd done to keep his body from slamming into the rooftop was likely what had also kept him from breaking any bones the first time Grian met him too. It was odd to witness it being

used in a battle sense. He could see why it'd be hard to counter.

The battle continued. Without the element of surprise working against him, Furioso was fairly efficient. He was against two opponents, and clearly on the defensive. His dual-wielded swords almost seemed to have a mind of their own, so they were able to keep both opponents at bay, but the tides would not be changing without an outside push.

Grian looked towards the fight on the ground to see if anything had shifted there, and if Furioso might get help from his teammate. Upon laying eyes on them, though, it was *immediately* clear that he wasn't skilled enough to actually tell who was winning.

Eclipse and Slayer had grown quicker, moving with precision so perfect that his brain hurt. Slayer's crossbow fired off at random, Eclipse's spear knocking the projectiles aside and forcing them nearer to each other. The villain eliminated the main advantages of both of their weapons with a move like that, but neither of them lacked close combat abilities either.

Slayer seemed more focused on throwing out attacks from this distance, so it was probably safe to deduce that she was playing offensive here. Eclipse, though not particularly built in the way of muscle, was nimble and fast. Better than that, with the click of a button, her spear shrunk to the size of a regular handheld knife and aided her techniques. Slayer was not able to do the same with her crossbow, so her defenses raised.

Eclipse dodged beneath a punch, grabbed Slayer under her arm, and flipped her. The hero hit the ground with a roll, but landed on her feet. She forged immediately back into the fray. The energy never faltered. Eclipse's blade slashed against armor futilely, Slayer failed to catch the villain with a knee to the gut, and then they were grappling.

Grian was enraptured by their scrapping, so much so that he could've missed the echoing cry of pain that came from the rooftop. It was only when Eclipse's eyes went wide and her head shot to the side that he realized something had gone wrong. The move caused the hero to take the lead and shove her to the ground.

The vet frowned, gaze darting up to check what had happened. His breath caught in his throat as he saw Ringmaster fall to his knees, very visibly clutching at his side.

Grian knew what his hands were covering, knew exactly why that area might be causing him pain.

His old wound had been reopened.

The vet's heart rate skyrocketed, the bag slung over his shoulder suddenly ten times heavier. He could only watch as Furioso lunged forward. Even as Ringmaster rolled aside, it wasn't enough for the second blade to miss him. Grian wasn't able to see the exact details, but he heard the scream, and knew the hit had landed somewhere unpleasant.

Suddenly, Boogeyman released his invisibility and threw himself at Furioso. He was able to knock the hero off balance, and send both of them toppling over. Ringmaster, though he was still holding his side, took advantage of the opportunity.

With both heroes engaged in battle with a Bamboozler, the third member of their trio slipped off the rooftop and out of sight.

That should've been where Grian ran. He didn't have a dog in this fight, didn't have a reason to stay, didn't even really care if one side won against the other. Except, he *couldn't* run. Not because his legs

were shaking too much like they had been previously, but because of an image that played over and over again in his mind.

Ringmaster holding his side, falling to the ground with the intensity of the pain.

Up on the rooftop, it'd looked as though he could barely walk. How was he faring now that he'd slipped away? Had his stitches properly healed enough to prevent a bad injury, or was this reopening something to be concerned about? Would he be able to escape before the heroes caught up to him?

Grian bit the inside of his cheek, shaking his head, but it was nothing more than a feeble attempt at dispelling a strong urge.

He was about to do something stupid – he could feel it. No point in denying it, or trying to fight what would inevitably win him over. The vet squeezed the straps of his bag tighter and resigned himself to probable death.

Then, Grian stepped out of the alleyway, and into the main street. He waited until Slayer's crossbow was pointed firmly away from him to begin sprinting in the direction where he'd last seen Ringmaster go. It was not hard to move past unnoticed.

If anyone saw him, it'd probably be the villains. The heroes were far too focused on their individual opponents to look up, but the Bamboozlers were worried about their teammate, so they were most certainly going to steal a glance at their surroundings every now and again.

Grian was, idiotically, *less* worried about the baddies catching wind of him. They were threats, but they'd met him before. It was unlikely

they'd try and stop the person responsible for saving their friend's life from getting to him a second time. The heroes would see Grian as a potential casualty, though, and probably move to evacuate him.

In the daylight, running down an empty street, he felt horrifically exposed. All it would take to end him right at that moment would be a single stray arrow, or a spear knocked aside at just the right angle. He was a sitting duck, diving headfirst into danger.

It would be fitting, at least, to go out because of his impulsive nature. Very like him.

Grian covered the final stretch of distance, turning into the side alley where he presumed Ringmaster had gone. Overhead, the other fight between Furioso and Boogeyman was still going strong. He heard the clanging of metal and shouted words, but couldn't understand much of it. So long as it wasn't interfering with him, he didn't really care one way or another.

Grian gazed into the alleyway, shivering from the adrenaline rush and wracked with a new sense of deja vu. The daylight made the whole scenario feel backwards, not quite right. It was more open than last time – *too* open. Besides the spaces behind barriers of stacked cardboard boxes and dumpsters, he noticed that nearly everything could be seen. The shadows weren't dark enough to disguise him should he be found out.

Suddenly, he could feel the stupidity of the idea nipping at his heels. Grian was going to get hurt, or worse, if he kept this up. Really, his attention should be on getting home, to safety — not *this*.

It'd be dangerous to leave the way he came, but not impossible to continue forward. He could leave, should he want to. There were dozens of outs, and the only person compelling him in this situation

was himself.

Subconsciously, Grian knew that if he took another step towards danger, the effects would be irreversible. Fixing up a criminal without truly understanding what he was doing was one thing. Seeking a criminal out because of a suspicion of injury, especially with the intent to help, was another.

He was too close to the fight, too out in the open, too near to too many ways that this could ruin his life. If not through death, then in reputation – because assisting the villains might eliminate the threat of being taken out by them, but it made him a direct enemy to the heroes. He could go to jail, lose his license, all he'd worked for.

Grian faltered.

He didn't *want* to destroy his life over something like this. Believe it or not, he'd never once pictured himself locked inside a prison cell, rotting away the rest of his days. That should've been enough to make him turn and run on its own.

Except, Grian had a stupid brain with stupid impulses and even stupider morals. He felt *obliged* to help now, because he knew he could, and he would regret it if something happened should he back out.

Grian didn't care about the villains — they were dangerous and had flipped his week on its head, especially Ringmaster – but no one deserved to bleed out alone in a back alley. That was cruel, and after witnessing the stalemate fight going on behind him, he knew it would be Ringmaster's fate.

No one else could reach him in time. No one else would be able to

help in time. No one else was able to take Grian's place here.

He drew in a deep breath, and started forward.

Ringmaster was not hard to track. Grian knew he was going the right way before he'd even laid eyes on the other man. The alley was permeated by the scent of iron and distant groans of pain. It wasn't long before he was rounding a corner and coming face to face with a villain slumped against a wall in a very familiar fashion.

The guy was obviously in bad shape, as he didn't immediately notice a new presence entering the area. Grian stared down at him, assessing the damage. Ringmaster's eyes were squeezed shut and his hands clamped over his side as though it was killing him. His face was covered in a sheen of sweat, costume torn in several places. While most of the rips in the fabric were unremarkable, there was a single one on his leg that made Grian pause.

He'd been, quite obviously, sliced in the upper thigh by a sharp blade. Furioso was undoubtedly the cause, though this blow didn't look deep enough to do serious damage. It appeared to be solely for the purpose of causing pain, or slowing down someone trying to escape. The arrow that'd been pulled out before was of a similar nature.

Grian had read somewhere that heroes were trained to imprison, not kill supervillains. Accidents could, of course, happen, but the intentionality of these blows were evidence enough of this teaching. Still, despite the severity not being quite as high, cleaning and wrapping the wounds as soon as possible was still a smart move.

He cleared his throat to draw attention to himself. Ringmaster startled, scrambling to press himself against the side of a dumpster. His green eyes looked wild, pupils dilated and brows creased.

“Calm down,” Grian said. “It’s just me.”

Ringmaster panted, chest rising and falling rapidly. Some of the tension left him as he realized exactly who was standing in front of him.

“Doctor?” He sounded hoarse, winded. “What are you–? Why are you *here?”*

Grian dug his nails into his palms to avoid giving a dumb answer. “I was watching the fight from down the street. Saw you get hurt, and I thought I’d check up on you.”

“Check… up on me?” Ringmaster’s confusion was palpable between them. The vet couldn’t blame him – Grian’s presence didn’t make sense to *him* either. “Are you… sure?”

And what a loaded question that was.

Grian had already debated this, already come to terms with it, already knew his conscience would never forgive him for ignoring a person in need. So, he nodded, and took a step forward.

There was a loud clamoring from further down the alleyway, causing the two of them to jerk their heads around to face it.

Grian waited for something to change, go wrong, for a hero to appear around the corner. But relative silence returned, and he opted not to waste anymore time. Grian knelt next to Ringmaster, pressing his

hands against the slash to help speed up the clotting process.

“We’re too close to the fight,” Ringmaster said. “Those two can’t hold off the heroes for long. Just leave. If you try to fix me up here, you’ll be caught.”

The vet paused.

Ringmaster was right. He hadn’t hobbled very far from the main road. All it would take was Furioso or Slayer to break away for a moment to locate him.

Grian glanced down at the injured man again. His wounds needed proper care, the kind that couldn’t be horribly rushed. The vet weighed his choices, drew out a map of the city within his mind, and landed on something that wasn’t the worst idea ever. It was risky, but staying put them in a similar boat.

“Let me wrap your leg, at least,” Grian said, wiping the redness from his hands with one of his cloths and getting out his bandages. “So that you don’t leave a trail of blood behind, and it keeps some semblance of pressure on it.”

“A trail of—? What do you mean?” Ringmaster stared as his most evident wound was tightly covered. The bandages were already turning scarlet from the freshness of the injury, but they’d hold for the time being. “Doctor, what exactly are you thinking?”

“You’re coming home with me,” Grian replied, too focused on the task at hand to elaborate.

“Oh, um,” Ringmaster said, the pitch of his voice changing beneath the modulator. Half-heartedly, he chuckled, “Little soon, don’t you think? Take me to dinner first.”

Grian’s head shot up, surprised. As the other’s words set in more, his jaw dropped, his brows furrowed, and his ears grew red. Inadvertently, he pulled the last of the wrappings a bit too hard, earning himself a wince from the villain.

“That is *not* what I meant,” Grian scoffed. He removed a hoodie from his bag, which he carried in case he got cold while on shift. It was oversized, probably able to fit the other. He packed his bag again and slung it over his shoulder, extending the clothing to Ringmaster. “Here, put this on. My apartment isn’t far. I thought it would be best to just go there. Only to fix you up, though. None of that… nonsense.”

“Ah, I see. Thanks,” the villain said. He put on the offering, flipping the hood over his head. The confusion hadn’t quite left his eyes, though. “But, Doctor, you still haven’t told me *why* you’re doing this.”

“I did tell you,” Grian replied. “I was watching the fight and–”

“No, no, not that,” Ringmaster interrupted. “Why would you *want* to check up on me? It’s dangerous. Besides, I threatened you the last time we saw each other.”

Grian studied the other man. There was honesty in his tone and genuine curiosity behind his gaze. In contrast to the other occasions he had encountered this individual, he didn’t feel any hostility being directed his way. This man was undoubtedly evil and definitely unpredictable, but he didn’t seem to be without reason.

He was fairly sure that, so long as he didn’t come across as a hazard to

Ringmaster, he would be alright.

“Yeah, well, you apologized. I’m not worried about that anymore,” the vet said. He held out a hand, and the villain took it. With a mild amount of effort, they were able to get the injured man to his feet. Ringmaster’s arm was tucked over his shoulder and he was adjusted to be leaning most of his body weight in Grian’s direction. “Unless, of course, you were planning on threatening me again.”

Grian stared up at Ringmaster, watching as the tips of his ears went red and his green eyes went wide. He shook his head, which was enough confirmation for the vet to feel secure.

Slowly, they started the shuffling trip down the maze of back alleyways. Grian knew they could stick to those for the majority of the walk home. He’d done it before, after he and Mumbo had a few too many at the bar and the street lights were too overwhelming for him to push through. Mostly-carrying someone in a stumbling collection of feet was actually a lot like getting home drunk.

When it came time for them to exit the alley and cross the street, Grian helped Ringmaster readjust the way the hoodie sat on him. Thankfully, his costume’s lower half wasn’t all that extraordinary, and the notable aspects of his identity were obscured.

This part of the city was not as abandoned, and they got a few concerned looks as people saw Grian supporting a limping individual. Ringmaster kept his head down and his mask out of sight, while Grian just offered as many polite smiles and quietly repeated, “He’s fine, he’s fine, don’t worry.”

Thankfully, the elevator up to his apartment was working, and getting inside was no issue. Once in, he flipped the lights on, and kicked off his shoes.

Ringmaster was led to the couch, made to sit, but Grian instructed him not to lean back yet. He quickly ran to his bathroom, grabbed a towel, and laid it over the cushions. It was both to keep blood stains away, and to prevent cat hair from irritating the wounds to the best of his ability.

Pearl and Maui initially came to greet them at the door, but had fled the moment they noticed their dad was toting an extra person. He figured they probably weren't fans of the scent of blood. They lived spoiled lives, those cats.

Grian gathered the things he needed, unpacked the contents of his bag on the coffee table, and returned his attention to Ringmaster. The villain was still clutching his side, breathing labored. He'd taken off Grian's hoodie to allow easier access, but it'd left him looking wholly disheveled in a torn shirt with messy hair.

To begin with, the vet shooed aside his hands and checked on his old wound. He whispered an apology as he lifted the guy's shirt, but was pleased to find that nothing was horribly wrong. The stitches had healed very well, and the skin was in good condition. It would scar, though not horribly.

When he pressed at the skin a little bit higher, however, Ringmaster gasped.

"Ow, ow, not there," he hissed, and Grian withdrew his hand. "I definitely broke a rib. That *sucks.*"

Grian nodded. "Yeah, seems like it. Explains the shortness of breath too, and why you screamed so loudly earlier."

“I didn’t scream loudly,” Ringmaster scoffed.

Grian shot him an unconvincing smile, but did not explicitly agree. “I’m sure it hurt more than a usual broken rib would because of the old wound. Any impact in this general area probably has that added effect.”

“Yeah,” Ringmaster said. “I guess.”

“Speaking of which,” Grian hummed. He narrowed his eyes, smile turning hostile. “Didn’t I tell you to take it easy? What exactly were you thinking going out a week after injuring yourself?”

He felt a little like a disapproving parent, but it had to be said, There were very few actual directions given to the villain to ease his recovery, and this absolutely went against all of them. To his credit, Ringmaster had the decency to seem a little embarrassed.

“Sorry, Doctor,” he chuckled, pulling at the collar of his shirt. “We really didn’t think we’d run into any heroes today. The plan was simple.”

“Plan?”

“Can’t tell you,” Ringmaster replied. Grian raised his hands defensively, and shrugged, not willing to push his luck over something trivial. He got to work again, letting silence fill the room. The wound on the villain’s leg needed his attention now. It didn’t last long.

“Hey, Doctor?” The vet hummed, glancing up from where he’d begun to unwrap his shoddy bandaging job. Ringmaster sounded a little

hesitant as he asked, “Could you turn on the news? I want to… make sure my Bamboozlers are okay.”

“Oh, um, yeah,” Grian said. “No problem.”

He grabbed his remote and switched on the television. It was already on the correct channel. He listened to a reporter chatting in the background while he cleaned Ringmaster’s leg. Grian was careful not to disturb the clotting as much as he could.

“Drone footage is showing the fight between Furioso and Eclipse is going strong,” the newscaster stated. *“We still do not have visuals on Boogeyman or Slayer after the hero broke off, supposedly to search for the missing Bamboozler.”*

He heard Ringmaster suck in a breath. “I didn’t tell them where I was going.”

Grian spared him a glance, and noticed a worried furrow to his brow. He felt like he was intruding a bit, so he cleared his throat and suggested, “Why don’t you tell them now? Use your watch.”

“I don’t want to distract them if they’re in combat,” Ringmaster replied. “They can’t have a conversation like that. I mean, just look at Eclipse.”

The vet checked over his shoulder. He saw the drone footage of the fight, where Eclipse had joined Furioso on the roof and taken Boogeyman’s place. The villain was wielding her spear at its full length, moving with similar precision to before and landing just as many hits, but something was off about this battle. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

“What’s wrong with her?” Grian had spoken before thinking, and realized only after the words were out that Ringmaster might take it the wrong way. “I mean, she’s acting differently than she was when I saw her earlier.”

“Hm? Oh, Eclipse?” Ringmaster’s brow raised, a sudden twinkle in his eye. “Nothing’s wrong with *her*. It’s a change in *Furioso’s* fighting style that you’ve noticed.”

“The hero?” Grian paused his curiosity briefly to consider whether or not this wound was in need of stitches too. He decided against it, since it wasn’t terribly deep or near anywhere particularly vital. Now that the area was properly cleaned, he would just have to bandage it and advise against agitating it again. “What’s Furioso doing differently?”

“He’s an impulsive fighter. His skills are strong enough that he can afford to wing it in combat without a real plan of what he’s going to do next,” Ringmaster continued, like it was something he just knew off the top of his head. Grian figured he probably did. “But when he goes up against Eclipse, he overthinks.”

“Yeah? Why would he do that?”

“Okay, you didn’t hear this from me,” Ringmaster started, and Grian perked up. “But we’re all pretty sure that Furioso has a crush on Eclipse. *That’s* why he fights so badly around her.”

“A crush?” Grian gasped, “On a villain?”

Ringmaster barked out a laugh. “Don’t say it like that! It’s not totally unbelievable. The Bamboozlers are all very attractive.”

Grian snorted then, shaking his head despite himself. The joke was said with so much ease and genuine humor that it was easy to forget he was conversing with a criminal. Their exchange felt more like two friends gossiping over a cup of coffee than anything quite as serious as heroes and villains. Honestly, once he noticed his own behavior, it was a little dizzying.

"You're not disagreeing," Ringmaster called, pulling Grian out of his own head. The villain propped himself up and leaned closer to the man kneeling beside the couch. "Of course you'd understand. You seem like a logical man, Doctor. Something tells me that you know an attractive trio when you see one."

"Ugh. Don't put words in my mouth." Grian scrunched up his nose. Against his better judgement, he put a finger on Ringmaster's forehead and gently pushed him back into a reclined position. The villain could've resisted, but he simply let it happen. "How is anyone supposed to think of you lot to be any particular way? Your faces are half covered at all times."

"Furioso certainly manages," Ringmaster mused, gesturing at the screen. Grian did his best to observe the ongoing battle with this newfound information in mind. It didn't seem all that out of the ordinary at first.

Both Eclipse and Furioso had weapons that could be used best within arm's reach of their opponent. Eclipse thrust forward, spear edge skimming the sleeve of the hero's costume where there was no samurai-themed armor to protect him. Furioso stumbled back a step, and then swung out with his swords, but the attempt was blocked by the handle of Eclipse's spear.

He was knocked aside, and kicked in the back of the knees. Without his double jump ability rocketing him up a bit, he would've fallen to

the ground. Furioso whirled around, pushing in and kicking out at the villain's gut. His ankle was caught, but he managed to yank it free before it could be used against him. Eclipse landed one more hit to his lower back — not a puncture wound, but certainly another scrape.

It took Grian really considering his actions to see this as anything other than a fair fight. Furioso had muscle on Eclipse, like Slayer. She was previously only holding her own with her fast movements, which she didn't seem to be utilizing here. It was clear that, while maybe she wasn't exactly destroying Furioso in offensive combat, Eclipse clearly wielded a higher level of control at the moment.

Instead of using his body weight to force her into a defensive position, Grian noticed that Furioso was keeping his distance, getting intercepted a lot more. Now that he was looking closely, the hero was indeed overthinking. He kept pausing to deliberate between attacks, and hesitating on the follow-through. Were it not for the villain sitting on his couch at that moment, Grian never would've known about the inner workings on display.

"Huh," he whispered. "You're right."

"Obviously," Ringmaster said, clearly proud of himself. "I'm always right."

Grian was going to make a comment about the validity of such a statement, when suddenly, the newscaster began speaking quickly. The footage of the fight panned away from Furioso and Eclipse to reveal where Slayer had just emerged from an alleyway off to the side. It zoomed in to reveal the hero was giving the camera a thumbs-down.

"Sad news," the reporter sighed. *"Slayer did not appear to have any luck apprehending either of the other two Bamboozlers this afternoon. The only one left on the scene of the crime is Eclipse. Our strategists predict she will*

likely attempt to corner the remaining villain with her teammate."

Grian's eyes widened, and he glanced over at Ringmaster. The joy had left his companion's expression. Without flinching, the villain raised his watch to his mask and said, "Eclipse, this is Ringmaster. Come in."

On the screen, once the camera had panned up again, Eclipse could be seen shoving away from Furioso and raising a matching watch to her lips. Grian heard the faintest amount of noise filter through Ringmaster's earpiece.

"Yes, I'm fine. Listen," Ringmaster continued. "Slayer's back. She's scaling the building behind you right now. Down and to your left. Boogeyman escaped already, so no reason to stick around."

Eclipse lowered her wrist, and changed her stance. Furioso seemed to catch onto a detail that Grian didn't, because he suddenly dropped his defensive posture and ran towards her, arms extended. He wasn't fast enough to do anything, and Slayer had only just made it to the top of the building.

Without warning, Eclipse's body became encased in shadow, which immediately exploded outward and knocked both heroes off balance. The camera remained unaffected, but the two she'd been fighting collapsed. They felt around, hands patting against the ground in an almost pathetic display.

They were blinded, Grian realized. *She'd used her powers.*

Eclipse didn't stick around to gloat, though. Instead, she took the opportunity to leave. The camera did its best to follow her, but its lens couldn't adjust in time to account for the lighting of the alleyways, and that split second was the most she needed to completely

disappear.

The newscaster narrated the situation and expressed disappointment at the loss. Neither of them were listening anymore.

Grian heard another low buzzing from Ringmaster's direction. "Hey, guys," the villain sighed. "Sorry for not telling you, but I left. Remember our doctor friend from the other day?"

His gaze flicked to Grian, and the vet tensed.

"Yeah, he fixed me up again. I'm at his place," Ringmaster continued. There was a muffled exclamation, to which the villain reacted with crinkled, amused eyes. "No, he hasn't treated me to dinner yet. I said the same thing. No one knows how to sweep a guy off his feet anymore."

"Why you little—!"

Grian clamped his jaw shut and glared at Ringmaster. It sounded like he and his teammates shared similarly annoying senses of humor. He grumbled under his breath, grabbing his phone from the coffee table to check the time.

It was five thirty in the evening. About an hour and a half had passed since he'd finished work, and his stomach was starting to feel it – especially after the physical effort Grian had put in to lug an injured man home. Making a meal wouldn't be the most outlandish thing to do next.

Usually, by that point, his cats would be sucking up to him for their

dinners too. Ringmaster was probably the only thing keeping them away. He should check up on them, see how they were faring. Hopefully, they weren't actually scared, just being shy.

With an agenda of his evening's plans slowly rolling out in his head, Grian stood and stretched. He felt eyes watching him, but pointedly refused to acknowledge the man on his couch. The kitchen called to him in the form of two mewling furballs that had been loitering in the doorway.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Grian told them, dragging his feet as he approached. There was rustling on the couch, so he called over his shoulder. "Don't stand. Let your leg rest for now."

A disgruntled grumbling was his response, but Ringmaster obliged.

While Grian fed his cats and quickly whipped something up to appease the growing pit in his stomach, he listened to the vague noise of Ringmaster speaking to his teammates in the background. Pearl and Maui were glad to be given a distraction from a stranger invading their space, chowing down as soon as he placed their bowls on the ground.

For himself, Grian made something simple. Spaghetti was fast and easy, not more than fifteen minutes. Ringmaster was having a full-on phone call basically, so he didn't feel guilty about leaving him on his own. As soon as it was done, Grian dished his dinner out into two separate bowls, poured on some basic marinara sauce, tucked in two forks, and returned to the living room.

Ringmaster glanced over as he approached. He was propped upright against some pillows, and a little more color had returned to his face in the short span of time since everything had been tended to.

“Sorry, guys. Have to go,” he said to his watch, lowering it. “What’s that, Doctor?”

“You wanted dinner, didn’t you?” Grian passed him one of the bowls, and gave the most passive aggressive smile he could manage. “Enjoy.”

“Oh,” the villain replied dumbly. He just gazed down at the portion in his hands, not reaching for the fork. “You… made some for me?”

“Yeah, well,” Grian sighed. “You’re kind of occupying my apartment at the moment. Would be awkward to only feed myself.”

“That’s… nice of you,” Ringmaster said. “But, uh, Doctor?”

“Yes?”

“I still can’t take off my mask.”

Grian’s expression was wiped clean in a single second. “You’re kidding. I did it again?”

Ringmaster straightened, eyes growing wide. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to waste your effort. I really do appreciate it.”

“It’s fine,” Grian said, but he was completely mortified. He took the bowl from Ringmaster, and started towards the kitchen. “I’ll just leave this portion in the fridge to eat later.”

“Wait!”

Grian stopped, glancing back.

“I’ll eat it.”

“You can’t,” the vet replied. “Your mask.”

“Well, I mean, that’s an easy work-around, right?” Ringmaster’s brows were furrowed, tone shaky. “As long as you… promise not to look at me, I can eat.”

It was Grian’s turn to go wide-eyed. He faced the other man fully, mouth agape. “What? But isn’t that risky? You don’t trust me.”

“Doctor,” Ringmaster tutted. “I’ll just kill you if you sneak a look. We both know that.”

The vet closed his mouth, lips stretching into a line.

He wasn’t sure if spaghetti was worth such a crazy exchange. Really, Grian didn’t care about the villain’s identity at all. In his opinion, only the heroes should worry about narrowing down aliases and catching baddies — it was literally their whole job. Reporting stuff to the police, or the Agency was not how he wanted to spend any of his days.

He didn't need nor want to see what was beneath that mask, and as long as he remained in the dark, he maintained an ounce of distance between them. They weren't friends, or trusted allies. Grian was just doing a debatably good deed, and then moving on with his life.

"Ugh," Grian groaned. "Fine. Suit yourself. If you murder me, though, do me a favor and tell my neighbor to take my cats from now on."

Ringmaster drew in a sharp breath. "You have cats?"

"Uh, yes? Two. Did you not hear their incessant meowing a second ago? They're not exactly quiet," Grian said as he passed back the bowl. "Both of them are shy around new people, but they're secretly nuisances."

He settled himself on the floor again, with his back leaning against the couch. It was the only position he could think of to prevent an accidental look, while also giving him a good view of the television. Grian started on his food, stomach rumbling to remind him of how truly little he'd eaten that day.

There was a clicking somewhere behind him, and a light hiss. Ringmaster hummed, happily saying, "I *love* cats. I have one myself, actually."

Grian tensed at the sound of his voice. Logically, he knew it was because the modulator had been taken off, but hearing him without that filter was extremely disorienting. He hadn't removed his mask since their first meeting, before the vet knew who he was helping.

"You have a cat? That's cool," he said, hoping his nervous energy wasn't audible. Suddenly, keeping his eyes trained on the television screen, even as it just played boring advertisements between news

segments was *intensely* interesting. He did not think about the fact that one of the city's best kept secrets existed right over his shoulder. Not at all.

"Mhm, her name is Jellie," Ringmaster went on, words slightly muffled by food. "She's very cute. I'd show you a picture, but I don't bring my phone with me on missions."

"Jellie is a lovely name," Grian hummed. "You probably need to get home to her soon, huh?"

"Yeah, probably," Ringmaster said. "I'll leave soon. Don't worry, Doctor. I wasn't planning on living on your couch forever."

Grian shook his head. "I wasn't worried about that. Longer you stay here, the more sure I can be that you're not deciding to do something stupid, like — oh, I don't know — going on another mission before you're healed."

Ringmaster laughed, and the noise sent a pang straight to Grian's chest. It was odd to hear it, like everything else, without the modulator. The sound was full, natural, and completely genuine. Though it was cut off by a bit of coughing from irritating his broken rib, Ringmaster was totally entertained.

"You're quite puzzling, Doctor," the villain said, tone surprisingly soft as his coughs tapered off. There was another shuffling as the weight distribution on the pillows changed. "I can't figure you out at all. Why do you care if I hurt myself further?"

Ringmaster had obviously leaned forward, because it sounded like he was hovering just barely out of sight. His presence could be felt mere inches away. Grian's heart jackhammered against his ribcage — both

because of his proximity to certain death, and something about the way the other was speaking to him.

Maybe it was just Grian's mind trying to minimize his fear and misinterpreting things, but Ringmaster seemed almost fond in his delivery.

"Well, it's *my* hard work that goes to waste when you do that," Grian muttered, earning another little chuckle from his companion. "I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you'd be so bad at following basic care regimens."

"Oh yeah?"

Grian shivered as he felt the villain's breath brush against the back of his neck. He was far too close. Gritting his teeth, he replied, "Yes. I've treated wild animals that are less frustrating."

A hand landed atop his head, ruffling his hair. Grian gasped, batting it away. If he could, he would've turned and smacked Ringmaster for such an egregious breach of personal space. For the time being, though, he was resigned to simply cursing the guy under his breath.

"Calm yourself, Doctor," Ringmaster teased. "My friends will come get me once it's dark outside. I'll be… *out of your hair* soon enough."

The pun only served to enrage Grian further. He angrily shoveled more spaghetti into his mouth. It wasn't fair that the villain was able to sit back there and piss him off without consequences just because his stupid face was exposed.

“After dark, you said? Good. Shouldn’t be too much longer,” he sighed, setting aside his now empty bowl. The television had returned to the news, but it was nothing particularly interesting. When there weren’t villains to keep the city on their toes, the entire place was fairly boring. “Do you need painkillers or anything while we wait? I have ibuprofen in my bathroom.”

“That’d be nice,” Ringmaster hummed. “Thanks, Doctor.”

“Ugh, stop calling me that,” Grian groaned, head dropping forward. “Somehow, you’ve made ‘doctor’ feel derogatory. You *know* my name.”

“Oh? Do I?”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” The villain made a noise of consideration. “You may have introduced yourself, but who’s to say I haven’t completely forgotten since then? I’m a very important man, Doctor.”

“Please,” Grian scoffed. “Don’t act like you didn’t use my name and profession to run a background check the second you got home to your stupid headquarters that first night.”

Ringmaster sucked in a breath. “What? How’d you know that?”

“How else would you have found my address?” Grian shrugged.

“Yeah,” Ringmaster said, quiet and almost inaudible. “I suppose that makes sense.”

“So, you *do* know my name,” the vet stated. “Stop with the nickname.”

“Alright, I guess I can stop a little bit,” the other replied. He heard Ringmaster lean back, voice growing further away with the motion. Slowly, almost hesitantly, he whispered, “Thanks, Grian.”

Grian took a deep breath, drinking in the sound of his own name. After a silent moment, he climbed to his feet, bowl in hand. “I’ll be right back.”

The villain didn’t respond. Grian left, popping into the bathroom near his bedroom. Maui hopped up on the sink, purring contentedly as his owner scratched behind his ears while digging through his medicine cabinet. Outside the frosted glass of the window above the tub, he could see how the light had pretty much faded from the sky. Gentle twilight had grown closer to dusk. Soon, this ordeal would be over.

It didn’t take long to bounce from there to the kitchen and fill up a cup of water. He decided not to give the guy any ice. Offering a lukewarm drink was the easiest way to subtly get back at his irritating guest, and he was not about to pass it up. Grian paused once he was outside of the living room, parked just around the corner to avoid seeing anything he shouldn’t.

“Cover your face,” he called. “I’ve got the stuff.”

He waited a moment, maybe to hear confirmation that it was safe to come in, the usual shuffling of the couch, or even the hiss of a mask being put back on, but nothing happened. Frowning, Grian knocked

on the wall.

“Hello? Ringmaster?”

Again, no response.

Dangerous as it was, Grian steeled himself, and walked around the corner. He found the couch empty, with one singular window propped open off to the side.

So much for leaving once it was completely dark.

Grian sighed, cleaned up the other empty spaghetti bowl, and inwardly promised to spend the night in a much more normal fashion. He put on mindless reality television, then sunk into his armchair, Pearl and Maui at his side.

Chapter End Notes

> Fellas, is it gay to make a man dinner after tending to his wounds?
>
> Thanks for reading! I'll see you on Tuesday!
>
> And a million thanks to my beta readers, as always, Cody and Smiif.
>
> For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Before this chapter begins, I would just like to reiterate that I am not a medical professional, and some aspects of this fic - though heavily researched - are not completely medically accurate. See a doctor if you experience anything vaguely similar to the injuries being treated in this fic.
>
> With that being said, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grian was woken by a rapidfire knocking at his door. He groaned, rolling to check his phone. What was going on? Was he late for work? Had Mumbo decided to pay him a spontaneous visit?

His screen showed that it was two in the morning. He wasn't due to go in for another twelve or so hours. There were no missed calls or texts either, so it was safe to assume whoever was outside wasn't someone he knew. Maybe the building had caught on fire and his neighbors were trying to get his attention?

With probably way too much laziness in his movements, Grian threw back the covers and stood. Pearl and Maui remained on his bed, not bothered by the commotion. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked to the front door. Slowly, he opened it.

Whatever the vet had been expecting, it was *not* to find three villains waiting in his hallway.

He raised a hand, rubbing at his face to check if he was hallucinating. No such luck.

Ringmaster stepped inside without waiting to be invited and took him by the shoulders, his green eyes wild.

“Grian,” he gasped, out of breath, as though he’d just run a marathon. “You have to help Eclipse.”

Immediately receiving such bombardment while still in a state of half-consciousness was not conducive to helping the vet process the situation at hand. He managed only a surface-level perception. Firstly, he was being grabbed by a villain, who was wearing a crazy expression and using a demanding tone — that alone was enough for the receptors in his brain to send preemptive shockwaves of fear through him.

Secondly, there were *words* being spoken to him, the kind that demanded he had a working brain capable of basic cognitive function. He squinted, an odd mixture of confusion and terror building in his veins at the same time. Grian inwardly went over the villain’s exclamation, and finally, some of it registered.

“Eclipse?” Grian blinked back sleep, tilting his head to the side to peer over the villain’s shoulder. Eclipse was currently curled up in Boogeyman’s arms, eyes squeezed shut and face coated in sweat. She was worryingly pale.

The sight sobered Grian up immediately. All fatigue fell away.

Grian had only seen Eclipse from this close on one other occasion, that being when she was threatening his life. During that brief encounter, she had been lively, alert, and notably bore a far more regular complexion. The person in front of him now was the polar opposite. She looked small, weak, and unbelievably vulnerable.

He saw, in that moment, not a supervillain capable of immense harm, but a person, who was suffering more and more with each passing second. A sense of responsibility washed over him, his every instinct honing in on her unstable condition.

Grian pushed past Ringmaster to press a hand to her forehead – burning hot. “What’s wrong with her?”

He glanced up to the two men lingering in his doorway to find his answer, and was surprised to see a pair of brown eyes glowering at him. Boogeyman took a step back, pulling Eclipse out of his reach and holding her closer to him. The action shocked Grian so severely that he almost didn’t hear it when Ringmaster answered him.

“We aren’t sure,” he told the vet. “She just collapsed when we were about to head out for a mission. I didn’t know where else to bring her, so we came here and—”

“Collapsed, you say?” Grian cut him off before he could spout details that were not terribly relevant to the obviously urgent situation. As strange as it was, he could fill in the blanks regarding those things. Ringmaster intended for him to extend his services towards this woman now. Whatever was truly ailing her, unknown or otherwise, the villain clearly believed he could do something about it.

Although, those assumptions raised a few more questionable points towards Boogeyman’s behavior. The lanky man was still cradling Eclipse carefully, keeping a solid distance between them. It was like he was trying to protect her from some unseen danger posed by the vet.

Grian frowned. Lowering his voice, he directed a question to Ringmaster, “Are you… sure you want my help? Your friend doesn’t seem too comfortable with the idea.”

Ringmaster straightened. Grian was able to see the moment the other realized exactly what Boogeyman was doing. His gaze flicked down to Eclipse, over to the vet, and then tracked the space between them.

Eyes growing wide, he cleared his throat. “Boogeyman,” he said, slowly but very clearly. “She is in pain. Do this *later.”*

Boogeyman didn’t say a word, but Grian noticed his posture loosen slightly. Taking advantage of the brief moment of silence, he stepped out of the way. “Bring her inside. I’ll be back.”

Grian left them at the door. He grabbed his medical tools, clean towels, and a handful of other things. By the time he’d returned to the room, his front door was shut and Boogeyman had sat down on the couch, keeping Eclipse in his arms.

Ringmaster was pacing behind them, but he stopped when he saw the vet. “Are you going to be able to do anything for her?”

His momentum faltered slightly. Grian pursed his lips, reminded all at once of the type of scenario he’d gotten tangled up in again. He’d made a slight amount of peace with the fact that he had aided one criminal, but a whole band of them was far more intimidating.

“I’m… going to try,” Grian replied honestly. He laid out towels over the couch and gestured for Boogeyman to set her down. The man was less hesitant to listen to him this time around. “We have to figure out what’s wrong with her first. Do you have any ideas?”

“I have a guess,” Ringmaster said, drawing Grian’s attention to him. “Not too long ago, she got a nasty cut on her back. She’s been talking

about how painful it is, but won't let anyone take a look at it."

Inadvertently, as he talked, Grian found himself scanning Ringmaster instead of Eclipse for injuries. His leg was obviously better, given how steadily he was walking, and his breathing didn't sound labored. It'd been about two weeks since their last meeting, and the Bamboozlers hadn't been publicly out and about after his talk with Ringmaster about taking it easy. Good for his healing process, but evidently, not for Eclipse.

He forced his mind to focus on the task at hand. "Her back, you said? Can you help me flip her over?"

Boogeyman assisted him, and together they put Eclipse on her stomach. Grian muttered a small apology to the woman, and gently pulled away the fabric of her shirt. He found what he was looking for immediately.

Three gasps sounded around the room.

"Oh no," Boogeyman whispered, speaking for the first time since they'd arrived. "That looks *bad."*

Ringmaster's gaze flicked up to the vet. "Grian?"

Grian stared firmly down at the scene located in the middle of Eclipse's lower back. A weight settled in his gut, sending his mind reeling.

It *wasn't* just a painful cut like he'd been expecting. Not in the slightest. Instead, what he saw was a textbook example of an injury

that had fallen to infection, and a rough case too — likely from a lack of proper care. By the looks of it, red and gross, it'd been building for a while. He bit the inside of his cheek to repress the ever-growing dread gathering within him.

Left untreated, this had the potential to become *sepsis.*

What had Eclipse been thinking to let it get this bad? Why hadn't she shown her teammates? What was he supposed to *do?*

"Grian," Ringmaster repeated. "Can you save her?"

Grian lifted his eyes, mouth pulled into a thin line. "A human doctor would be so much better, guys."

A low groan echoed from the woman on his couch. All attention moved to her as her eyes blinked wearily open. She met Grian's stare. Through a heavy tongue, with great effort, she rasped, "No doctor."

"I'm serious," Grian hissed. "This is bad and–"

"No, you heard her," Boogeyman interrupted. "Regular doctors are too dangerous. It's you or no one."

That didn't feel entirely fair. He couldn't refuse to help when they put him in a position like this. Grian scowled, chewing on his lip and weighing his options. Her wound was swollen, red, and undoubtedly painful. Without help, she would get worse. After her collapse, her organs shutting down wouldn't be too far behind. He might not be able to do much, but certainly it would be better than nothing.

Ringmaster and Boogeyman both were staring at him with pleading eyes, begging for him to at least try. And Grian was weak. A human doctor would be better, but he was here, he was their chosen option, he was the only one that could do anything. Now that he'd seen the wound, he was implicated, accountable. If she died because he turned her away, criminal or not, he wouldn't feel worthy of his license anymore.

"Fine," he sighed. "I'll give it my best shot. Let me get some saline solution."

Grian stood and hurried off. Vaguely, he registered Ringmaster muttering something to his teammates and following. While the vet was searching through his bathroom's first aid kit for the solution, the villain approached him.

"Hey, um," he started. Grian spared him a glance. "I'm sorry about this, Grian. I just… Hospitals would put the pieces together and call the police, and we don't know anyone with superpowered healing. You were the only person that could help."

"I get it, dude," the vet replied, stopping him before he could collapse into a nervous rant. Strange as it was to see one of the city's infamous villains breaking down in front of him, it was happening, and he was going to have to adjust accordingly. His life was completely flipped upside-down at this point. No going back. "I'm not exactly pleased to have to deal with this at two in the morning, but I'd do the same thing in your position."

Ringmaster perked up slightly. "You would?"

"I would," Grian confirmed.

The villain sighed, visibly relieved. “Thank you, Grian.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” He found what he was looking for and passed it off to Ringmaster so he could wash his hands. “I still have to see what I can do for her.”

Grian returned to the room, and took basic stock of the situation. He checked her pulse, put a hand on her back to feel her breathing, and nodded to himself.

“Alright, her breathing is too shallow,” he concluded. “She needs an oxygen mask and soon if we want even a chance at keeping her stable. Do either of you know where we could get one quickly?”

“Boogeyman does,” Ringmaster said as he set the bottle he’d been carrying down on the coffee table. Boogeyman made a noise of confusion, but he was quickly pulled aside. Something was whispered in his ear, and he brightened.

“I do! I’ll be right back,” Boogeyman proudly announced. It was the most chipper he’d been in the entirety of the time since he’d entered the apartment. He rushed out the front door, leaving Grian with one more errand for the remaining man to run.

“Ringmaster, she needs fluids too,” Grian mentioned. “I don’t have anything like an IV in my home, though.”

“Leave it to me,” Ringmaster said, nodding. Unlike his colleague a moment prior, he exited the apartment through the window. Grian was able to hear the whirring of his grappling hook — a tool he assumed all three of the Bamboozlers used to get around the city. It

explained their speed and ability to scale buildings that others might not.

While waiting for them to return, he supposed he'd get started doing what he could. The vet sorted through the necessary tools. His curved tip syringe was the first thing he'd be using.

"I'm flushing the wound," he told Eclipse, though he wasn't entirely certain she was still conscious. Grian didn't wait for a response, beginning the process. Eclipse made a noise of discomfort as the saline came into contact, and he muttered more quiet apologies.

It was necessary to clean the area thoroughly. If he had to make a rough guess, the place had most likely gotten infected due to a lack of attention in the healing process. Since it was in an awkward place for Eclipse to reach, her cleanings and wrappings would've likely been incomplete if she'd done them herself. Considering how surprised her teammates were to see the wound, he supposed it wasn't often she allowed them to actually help with stuff like this.

Not to mention that its placement near her spine meant the skin was stretched often, giving it potential to be reopened. Grian had seen Eclipse fight. She was fast, reliant on movement. Even the best-wrapped injury in the world wouldn't stand much of a chance of remaining closed under those conditions.

Once the wound was properly flushed, Grian proceeded on with a pair of forceps. There was a bit of debris and visible unpleasantness that needed to be picked out, loosened by the solution. The tissue retaining the worst of the damage had to be removed in order to give her the best chance to heal later.

He dried the area with gauze, then paused to breathe. From there, it was already looking better. Not perfect – that would require time and

repeated care – but this was an improvement. Grian applied a triple antibiotic ointment, and moved on to dressing the wound.

“I’m back!” Boogeyman burst through the door, a portable cannula oxygen machine wheeling in behind him. Grian was surprised and a little confused about the speed in which he’d gotten something so useful. Where he’d found it was less important than putting it onto his teammate, though.

If they hadn’t needed to go fetch it, that mask would’ve been one of the first steps. Without solid airflow, Eclipse was always going to be in danger. Now, getting it properly over her mouth and nose was the real challenge.

Grian didn’t know these villains, and couldn't request things like the removal of her gas mask without endangering his own life. He suspected that Boogeyman, given the hostility he’d already shown towards him, wouldn’t be likely to encourage actions like those. They’d have to get creative.

“Boogeyman, I’m going to talk you through putting this mask on her so that I don’t see her identity, okay?”

Boogeyman tensed, obviously caught off guard, but nodded.

Grian averted his eyes. He heard the hiss and click of her gas mask being removed. He began explaining as best he could about what to do with the tubing, and how to assure the mask was properly adhered to her face. Once Boogeyman told him it was in place, he switched the oxygen tank on, and listened as her breathing grew steadier.

What to do at this point, though, was a bit more worrisome. Grian still needed to look at her. Keeping his gaze averted wasn’t sustainable.

How were they supposed to keep her identity unknown without cutting off airflow?

A pathetic option came to mind, one he wasn't certain Boogeyman would take to. For the first time, Grian wished Ringmaster would come back. The guy was off-putting and dangerous and overwhelming, but at least he could be vaguely trusted to not kill him for trying to help. Grian mustered up his confidence, gathering it in his chest and willing it to stay there.

"Boogeyman? Can you do me a favor? Go into my bathroom and grab a clean hand towel from off the rack."

Grian heard a hum of confusion. He waited for a moment, and there came the sound of receding footsteps. After a moment, Boogeyman returned, presumably with the towel in hand.

"Alright. Now, I need you to tie it around her face," he instructed. "Over the oxygen mask, but not too tightly. Just obscure her identity, and then tell me when I'm safe to look."

"Oh, uh, yeah," Boogeyman muttered. He shuffled around some more. Grian saw his boots out of the corner of his eye. "Okay, um, I think it's safe?"

Grian glanced over. He stifled a laugh at the clumsy job, figuring it wouldn't be appreciated, and offered Boogeyman a thumbs up.

In reality, it wasn't really the safest thing in the world. The towel had been tied awkwardly, and was clearly slipping down a bit over her covered nose. Someone who wanted to look would just have to change angles, or cause an accidental pull on the towel to reveal her whole face.

And when it came to the back of her head, he'd clearly paid no mind to how her hair was settled before tightening the fabric. Pink strands were bunched up and sitting in weird angles, messed up by careless contact.

Grian couldn't see her facial features, though, and she had oxygen, so it did the trick. As long as she didn't move too much, everything would be fine.

Knowing she was breathing properly now removed a massive weight off his chest. He felt significantly better about their chances. If Ringmaster found them some fluids, they could probably avoid the worst case scenario of sepsis all together.

"That was smart of you."

Grian glanced up, surprised by Boogeyman addressing him. "Pardon?"

"The towel thing," the villain clarified. He didn't meet Grian's eyes, still scowling a little. "I didn't think about hiding her identity until you suggested it."

"Yeah, well," Grian muttered. "I do actually value my life."

Boogeyman looked at him then, one brow raising. "Really?" He huffed, "But you still went charging after my teammate in the middle of a battle? *Twice?"*

Grian flushed, mouth agape. He wasn't expecting the jab, wasn't even

sure how to respond to it. The comment both felt like an accusation and a joke at the same time.

"I just," the vet started, tripping over himself. "I just wanted to…"

"Careful, Doctor," Boogeyman hummed. "You stutter much more and I might go back to thinking you have an ulterior motive."

Grian sucked in a breath, a chill creeping up his spine. "Go… back? Did you ever *stop* believing that?"

His attitude for the whole evening told a very different story. The vet had been navigating his way around a minefield since the trio arrived.

"A bit," Boogeyman said. "The first time you helped was suspicious, but you didn't do anything with the evidence you clearly had, and you never so much as attempted to clue anyone in to your actions. We observed you for days, but came up empty."

Grian tried not to acknowledge the justification for his days of paranoia buried in the other's words. He forced himself to keep a neutral expression — as much as a man terrified to death *could* be neutral — and listened closely.

"The second time you came barging into our lives was just sheer stupidity," Boogeyman went on. "Which certainly raises some new questions, doesn't it? What's wrong with you? What kind of civilian deliberately chases after a villain?"

Grian swallowed. "One who wants to help."

“And why would you want to help us?” Boogeyman bent at the waist to bring him closer to Grian’s eye level. “We’re not exactly worthy of your good graces.”

“Doesn’t mean you deserve to die,” Grian replied without thinking. “Not like that.”

Boogeyman blinked, clearly taken aback.

The vet clamped his mouth shut, averting his gaze. Eclipse was breathing steadily, some of the perspiration clearing from her brow. Grian was a little ashamed of how much that relieved him to see. God, he felt like a fool. Maybe if he actually had an ulterior motive, this whole situation would’ve been more palatable.

But he didn’t, and it wasn’t. He was sitting on the floor next to his couch, helping to fix up yet another injured criminal, and preaching about how everyone deserved long, healthy lives.

Grian wondered how many lives these three people had taken. He’d never allowed his late-night curiosities to find the answer to that.

While Boogeyman hovered awkwardly off to the side, and the two of them awaited the return of the third member of the Bamboozlers, Grian opted to use this bit of quiet time to do necessary research on his phone. As always, he pointedly avoided looking up gruesome questions. Instead, the vet focused entirely on double-checking the medical knowledge he was sure to need if the evening went accordingly.

Ringmaster did return eventually. Grian stared in awe as he balanced

a cacophony of items on the fire escape and gently handed them through the window to Boogeyman. He was toting a full IV setup and a couple of bags of precariously-balanced fluids. The mental picture of him running down the street with those things clutched in his arms was simultaneously ridiculous and a great explanation for why he'd taken so long to get back.

Grian was slightly more knowledgeable on the proper procedures for hooking such things up thanks to his impromptu research, but he managed to still be intimidated as an entire hospital room worth of equipment was arranged around his couch. The IV was similar enough to the kind used on animals, with the exception being its extra complications in the plugs and points of insertion.

Once he snapped out of his shock, though, he made it work. It didn't take terribly long either. With that, the immediate treatment of Eclipse concluded. She had oxygen, fluids, a freshly cleaned wound, and a not-terrible condition that would hopefully remain consistent.

"Alright," he said, starting to address the other two. His spirits had been lifted slightly by the smooth process, even if he might not ever feel totally fine again. "I've done what I can for the time being. The rest relies on you."

"Us?" Ringmaster's brows furrowed. "Okay, what do you need us to do?"

"I'm going to give you a little bit of chlorhexidine mixed with distilled water to clean her wounds whenever you change her bandages, and some cream to help keep it moist," Grian said. "Be gentle, but it'll need to be kept up frequently. Monitor her pulse and breathing as well, since those could go south with little warning. When she's properly awake, more antibiotics would be good too."

Realistically, now would be the point in which he'd take a blood sample and try to figure out exactly which bacteria specifically they were dealing with. Since they didn't have that kind of time, nor did they have access to a lab in which to observe any gathered samples, he compiled a mental list of options that might cover a wide range of possibilities.

The two villains nodded along, never once losing focus. Grian was a little touched to see how fiercely they cared for their friend, even as one of them still wasn't comfortable with him. Eclipse was in good hands.

They lapsed into momentary silence while the vet attempted to remember any last comments he wanted to make.

"By the way," Grian hummed. "How did you guys manage to get this stuff so quickly? It was extremely helpful, but I don't know how I would've done it with similar time restraints."

"Oh, I robbed a hospital," Ringmaster replied. "Can you believe they just leave some of this stuff out unguarded in their storage rooms? They were basically asking for it."

Grian slowly turned to face him, horror dawning on his expression. The villain didn't seem the slightest bit aware of his own atrocities, content to stare down at his injured friend.

Grian didn't know what he'd expected the guy to do when he'd requested an IV — maybe go to a medical supplies store, but even then, it'd have to be theft of some sort to account for timing. At least the hospital nearest him was a particularly well-funded one, so they could afford to replace equipment like this. That didn't make him more comfortable with the circumstances, but he was grasping onto any sanity he could find.

Then, another realization struck him. His horror shifted onto Boogeyman. “How did you get this oxygen tank?”

“Oh, this? Easy!” Boogeyman patted the tank lightly. “We saw an old woman using something like it when we were bringing Eclipse in. I found her apartment and stole one of her spares!”

Grian blanched.

“You stole *oxygen* from an *old lady?”*

The breath was knocked out of him so quickly that he thought he might pass out. Suddenly, Eclipse wasn’t the only person in the room in need of an oxygen tank.

Stealing from the elderly — one of his neighbors, no less! Was there anything more criminal than that in the entire world?

Grian was pretty certain the hall cameras had been broken for months, but if he was wrong and someone saw a supervillain stealing things to bring into his unit, he was going to be evicted. Or, worse than that, his neighbor was going to run out of oxygen and not have her necessary backup equipment!

What chaos had he caused by allowing this energy into his life?

“Relax, big guy,” Boogeyman said. His eyes shone with a malicious sort of amusement. “She had, like, six of these in her apartment. I counted before I deprived the old hoarder of a single tank.”

Grian hugged himself. “Are you… sure?”

“Yeah, I’m not *that* awful,” Boogeyman grumbled, though he didn’t make total eye contact. Ringmaster, for reasons Grian didn’t completely understand, kicked him lightly in the shins. The lanky villain frowned, and then sighed. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll order a couple more and replace the one I took.”

The vet didn’t respond for a moment, stun-locked.

“Yeah, actually,” Grian said gingerly, nodding. “It would. Do that, and order some extra tanks for Eclipse as well. No telling how long this’ll last.”

Speaking of Eclipse, she’d stirred slightly more, mumbling vague things every now and again. It was clear she had a bit of a fever, as evidenced by her temperature. The poor woman had to be uncomfortable. He wondered why it’d taken this long for any of the three to realize something was severely wrong when it was so visible now.

He voiced that question as politely as he could, and Ringmaster’s eyes grew a bit sad.

“Eclipse is resilient,” was his answer. “She hides things well, and is too stubborn to ask for help often. I knew she wasn’t feeling great, but… I guess I thought she would say something before it got to this point.”

It was a far more emotional response than anything Grian could’ve anticipated. Ringmaster and Boogeyman both looked uncomfortable and downtrodden — so utterly human. They weren’t rabid animals on

the side of the street anymore, or bothersome fears that he could carry around without much personal impact on himself.

The two of them, and Eclipse by extension, were flawed in their own right. They were villains bearing the same responsibility and insecurities as any normal person might. Ringmaster and Boogeyman believed their friend would trust them with her pain. And she believed, from what he'd gathered, that she could get through the pain alone.

Grian slipped off one last time to grab a washcloth and a bowl of water. He returned, knelt, and began to wipe the worst of the sweat from her face. She gave a content sigh, leaning into it. Her eyes opened slightly, holding a bit more clarity than before.

"Eclipse," Ringmaster said quietly. He sat down next to Grian to put himself in her line of sight. "Why didn't you tell us you were hurting?"

Grian opened his mouth to scold him for encouraging her to speak, but she'd already started croaking out a response. "Thought I had… the situation under control."

Her voice was odd to listen to from the perspective of one who had never met her without her vocal modulator. To say Grian had a clear idea of what she sounded like without it would be a lie. The oxygen mask provided pretty solid cover, interrupting her tone with white noise and a hoarse kind of rasp. This wasn't a voice he related with Eclipse, but it wasn't that of a civilian either.

She took in several deep breaths, giving herself time before adding on, "Didn't want to worry you."

"Yeah, well, you *did* worry us," Boogeyman scoffed, but there was a

softness to his gaze that betrayed the harshness of his words. “Don’t do it again. Even if you’re just being dramatic, anything’s better than this.”

Grian felt a little like he was intruding on a stern family argument, like he should let himself out. Unfortunately, this was *his* living room, and these three didn’t seem like they’d be capable of going anywhere for a while longer.

He decided it’d be best to go prepare things for them while they talked amongst themselves. Grian slipped off to the bathroom. He put together a bit of watered-down chlorhexidine in a travel-size shampoo bottle. Some gauze was shoved in a ziplock bag, along with extra wrappings, some antibiotic cream, and other items he thought Eclipse might need.

On his way back to the living room, he stopped and wrote the names of recommended antibiotics on a sticky note and added it in. When he returned, Grian passed off the makeshift first-aid kid to Ringmaster, who accepted graciously. Eclipse and Boogeyman had dissolved into mindless bickering during the time he was away.

“You *have* to let me carry you, idiot,” Boogeyman was saying. “How else are we gonna get home?”

“No,” Eclipse hissed. “That’ll hurt! Just let me… try to walk.”

Grian didn’t like what this argument was about one singular bit. The idea of Eclipse’s injury being irritated again so soon after being treated was not pleasant — especially now that she’d be toting along an IV and an oxygen tank.

The vet sighed, interrupting to say, “She shouldn’t be moved yet. How

about you guys just… stay the night instead?”

Silence fell over them.

All three Bamboozlers shared a skeptical look.

“Oh, uh,” Ringmaster started, wincing. “We couldn’t possibly…”

“We won’t be doing that,” Boogeyman interrupted, surprising Grian. Ringmaster shot his teammate a glare, but didn’t step in to deny it. “Too dangerous.”

Grian’s mouth tipped down into a frown. “What? You think staying here is more dangerous than ruining all my hard work and risking Eclipse’s life to go home?”

The three didn’t answer him, having a silent conversation. It seemed as though this were a genuine point of debate for them – which the vet couldn’t understand for a single second. This was a no-brainer to him, something that only an idiot would argue. No doctor in good conscience would let them go.

But villains were different, he supposed. They had weird standards, skewed moral compasses, and double lives that were beyond his comprehension. If he wanted them to quit with their self-destructive tendencies, then he was going to have to adhere to their unbelievably complex thought processes.

“I’ll lock myself in my bedroom for the evening,” Grian declared, packing up his stuff and standing. “Close the curtains, put a chair in front of my door, only remove it when you’re about to leave in the

morning, and you'll be safe."

The three gave him a look like he'd said something completely off-the-rails, eyes wide and brows furrowed. "Wait," Ringmaster stammered. "Really?"

Grian nodded, and didn't pay their shock any mind. It was better to be completely confident in his own decision. "I'll leave my phone and laptop out here too, so you know I'm not calling anyone."

Though he felt a little badly about it, he was putting into motion a tactic he used on animals that seemed standoffish. Moving with certainty was infinitely wiser than tiptoeing around them and giving off the impression that he was a lurking threat waiting to pounce.

These three were equally as skittish – one of them was injured, another was aggressive, and the last was prone to escaping at the first available opportunity. If he had a pack of bonded strays meeting the same criteria, then this sort of behavior would be run of the mill. Hesitating here would only make them feel worse.

Besides, after exerting so much energy at such an awful time of night, his bed was calling to him. It was nearing four, and he did still have responsibilities outside of his illegal medical practices during the daylight hours. Whether there were three dangerous criminals in his house or not, they hadn't killed him yet. Exhaustion was far more pressing to him.

He mumbled a hasty farewell and pushed past them to walk down the hall. Grabbing his phone and his laptop, he deposited them on the hall table. Grian was halfway back to his room when he heard footsteps behind him. He stopped, whirling around to find the source, and nearly crashed into Ringmaster.

“Woah, my bad,” the villain said, holding his hands up. Grian offered him a confused frown. “I just wanted to… thank you again. I’m really grateful to you.”

Grian’s brows raised. He wasn’t expecting to hear yet another genuine thanks from Ringmaster. Since that first night, the guy hadn’t actually forgotten to be polite where it was necessary. It made him feel less terrifying – more human.

“Seriously, Grian,” Ringmaster insisted. “I owe you, and I don’t say that lightly. If you ever need anything, please let me know. Money, food, protection, anything.”

The vet didn’t immediately respond. His words sunk in.

A favor from a villain.

Grian was being offered a *favor* from a *villain.*

Ringmaster’s gaze was intense and honest as he spoke. This wasn’t a joke. Everything that had been said was meant wholeheartedly. Grian was being offered the ability to ask for anything within the other’s power should he want for it.

The vet straightened, swallowing against the closing of his throat. That was an intimidating gift, too much for someone like him to possess.

“Wow. Hefty promise, huh?” Grian’s voice cracked. “Are you sure I

won't… use that against you?"

His question earned him a small laugh, light and airy.

"I'm sure," Ringmaster replied, eyes crinkling. "I'm a pretty good judge of character. We've given you so many opportunities to turn on us, but you've done nothing yet."

There was a brief moment in which his gaze dropped, and slowly crept back up to Grian's face again. The villain's countenance shifted the slightest bit, almost imperceptibly.

"Not to mention, Doctor," he said. "You're too valuable to let go, even if it backfires on me in the end."

Grian sucked in a breath. "Valuable?"

"No one's ever helped us before. Not like this, at least," Ringmaster hummed. "We used to patch our own injuries, and we weren't exactly experts. I'm not sure what we would've done against something as bad as this without you."

The vet searched the extent of his visible expression, soaking in all of the gratitude shining there.

"You've done a lot for us, though we've only met four times now," Ringmaster pointed out. "Let me show my appreciation just this once."

Grian's heart squeezed behind his ribs. It wasn't the first time one of

them had mentioned how abnormal it was for a person to try to help them. Realistically, he understood that their villainy was the cause of such a thing, but his chest ached to a different tune.

He imagined, as he had so many times already, a world in which he was not the guy who found Ringmaster in that alleyway originally. Aside from his medical knowledge being all that kept the guy from either bleeding out or getting caught, there were other factors at play. A different individual might've gone to the police, might've handed over their instruments immediately, might've run away from the area of a fight, might not have answered their door to three of the city's most wanted criminals.

Ultimately, it was Grian's own decisions that had led him to this point. It was his empathy that had dug a grave beneath his feet. Whether those past choices kept him alive or damned him more was yet to be fully discovered, but it was undoubtedly true that he'd come too far to turn back now.

It had reached a point where he needed to either accept that he was fine with the arrangement they had, or break off from this dynamic they'd begun to establish before it took root.

"Well, since you owe me," Grian started. Ringmaster leaned forward, eager. "Make sure someone drives Eclipse home tomorrow. No walking or carrying or anything like that, you hear me?"

It wasn't the anticipated response, that much was obvious by the way Ringmaster faltered. However, Grian didn't intend to ever seriously use something like a villain's favor. Anything he wanted, he could achieve himself, through fair and completely legal means.

The set of his jaw and the finality in his gaze was enough to relax Ringmaster a bit.

“Alright, I promise.” Ringmaster put a hand over his heart. “Whatever you want, Doctor.”

Before he let himself speak again, Grian thought about his next words carefully, thought about the years to come carefully, thought about the fate of everything he loved carefully.

His mind was already made up as those same thoughts took shape on his tongue.

“And in the future,” he said, slow and shaky. “If you ever need help like this again, I promise to try to be there for you. As long as it doesn’t, y’know, interfere with my work.”

The relief that flooded Ringmaster’s expression was palpable. His shoulders slumped, a low chuckle emanating from his lips. “Really?”

Grian nodded.

Then, without warning, Ringmaster yanked Grian into a tight hug. The vet blinked, mouth agape, wholly caught off-guard. A strong grip had completely enveloped him, and he was squeezed against a well-built chest. His mind spun, a mixture of strange feelings swirling in his gut. Ringmaster pulled back before he had a chance to reciprocate, though.

“You’re so cool, man,” the villain declared. “You won’t regret it.”

Ringmaster shot him a final wave, and left him standing there in

shock. Unsure of what else to do, he turned around, locked himself in his room, and sank to the floor. It took another hour before he was able to muster the strength to get under his covers.

When Grian woke up the next morning, it was to a scent that was unfamiliar to his nose. He got out of bed, yawning and wiping sleep from his eyes. The source of the smell could be traced to his kitchen. Once there, he discovered a plate of freshly-made bacon and pancakes waiting for him, right beside a sticky note.

Dear Grian,

Thanks for the help! We left before sunrise, but your hospitality was greatly appreciated, so we made you this. Thanks to you, we're sure Eclipse will recover swiftly. Have fun at work!

-The Bamboozlers

"I feel like something's off," Mumbo said, leaning back in his chair and twirling a pen around in his fingers. The television in the corner of the office buzzed with the words of a news reporter, covering the city's latest villainous scheme.

Grian glanced up from where he'd been filing paperwork, following his coworker's line of sight. "What? It's just the Tuff Guys up to some useless plot again."

The news feed cut to show a ridiculous chase scene happening through the middle of town. Dozens of police cars were speeding after a singular motorcycle, which held three cackling villains. They were

waving a duffle bag of money over their heads, far too proud.

What they had yet to realize about said bag was that it was slightly unzipped. All of their spoils were flying out onto the road behind them, wasting the effort it had just taken them to acquire it in the first place. According to the newscaster, the police's current plan at the moment was to keep chasing them around until it was completely empty. No need for the heroes to get involved.

It was not out of the ordinary for the Tuff Guys to accidentally achieve feats like this. Grian could practically already see the main headlines for the next few days being along the lines of, *'Three Idiots Rob a Bank and Get Nothing.'*

"Yeah, I know," Mumbo said. "But isn't there usually more going on? Something with – I don't know – higher stakes? Like, where are the Bamboozlers?"

Grian dropped his pen.

"Oh, I'm not sure." He cleared his throat, and picked it up. "Maybe they're coming up with a super scary plan."

It wasn't totally a lie. Grian didn't, in all honesty, know what the villains were up to. They hadn't been publicly seen in a little less than a month, though five days had passed since *he* had last interacted with them. If he had to guess, they were laying low while Eclipse recovered.

Whether or not they were planning something during their downtime, that wasn't within his well of knowledge.

“Maybe,” Mumbo said, shrugging. He got back to scrolling through their email, none the wiser to Grian’s brief panic. “I would just so prefer to watch a more intense battle while I’m wasting away here.”

“Right,” Grian croaked, going for an amused smile, but falling a little short. “And the Bamboozlers always deliver, don’t they?”

He certainly felt like the stakes were massive anytime *he* interacted with them. When it came to their fights, though, Grian knew much less than the average person. Mumbo tended to keep up with the news more than he did.

“Yeah, and besides that,” Mumbo started, though he trailed off, growing a little red in the cheeks.

Grian leaned closer. “What? What is it?”

“Well, Ringmaster,” Mumbo said, clearing his throat. “He is quite the sight, isn’t he?”

Grian’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “Oh my God, do you have a crush on a wanted criminal?”

“Grian,” Mumbo whined, shushing him. “Keep your voice down!”

“You aren’t denying it,” Grian realized with a mounting horror. “You *aren’t denying it.”*

“Oh, please! It’s not *that* weird!” Mumbo straightened his scrubs and

crossed his arms. “Half the internet agrees with me anyway. Have you *seen* the guy?”

“No,” Grian lied way too quickly. “Not even once.”

Mumbo raised a brow.

He winced, blindingly aware of the bad call he’d just made. For a moment, he expected to be questioned for his suspicious behavior.

Then, his friend shook his head and sighed, “Right, I forgot that you’re far too focused on your work to be aware of other people.”

“Excuse you,” Grian scoffed, shoving him and sending his rolling chair across the floor. Mumbo laughed at his angry expression. “If *I’m* supposedly socially inept, think about where that leaves you. A celebrity crush does not make you better than I am!”

“Fine, fine, alright,” Mumbo relented between bouts of laughter. Eventually, he calmed enough to ask, “Are you going home soon? Your shift’s basically over.”

“Yeah, after I finish this,” Grian told him. “Might go grab dinner quickly. Did you want to tag along?”

“Can’t,” Mumbo groaned, pursing his lips in a way that made them almost disappear in his mustache. “My neighbor wants me to go over and check if her chihuahua is shaking the correct amount… Whatever *that* means.”

“Ah,” Grian replied, frowning. “Yeah, have fun. I do not envy you.”

“Grian!” Skizz strolled around the corner, a bright smile on his face and a pep in his step. Both Mumbo and Grian greeted him, exchanging brief pleasantries before he said, “You can go ahead and clock out, buddy. I’ll take over.”

“You sure?”

Skizz nodded, and Grian stepped back, willing to quit dealing with paperwork without much of a fight. He bid his coworkers farewell, heading off to collect his stuff. His stomach grumbled, excited for the prospect of food. Twilight was already looming by the time he’d gotten out of the building.

“Hello, Grian.”

Grian startled, whirling around to see a familiar figure lingering in the alleyway beside the clinic. The vet’s eyes grew wide, and he rushed over to pull Ringmaster further out of sight. He checked to make sure no passersby had seen him, and then whispered, “What are you doing here?”

Ringmaster tilted his head, regarding the vet with far less urgency. “I’m doing well. Thanks for asking, Doctor.”

“Right, yeah, hello,” Grian gritted out. “What are you doing here?”

Under his prying gaze, Grian did not *at all* recall the conversation he’d just finished having with Mumbo. He did not subtly scan the man in front of him with the newly-acquired knowledge that a large majority

of the city found him attractive. He *certainly* did not understand how everyone reached that conclusion either.

“You said I could come to you if I needed help,” Ringmaster replied. “So, I came to pick you up from the clinic.”

“You need help?”

Grian looked the villain up and down again, this time checking him for immediate signs of injury. He looked fine – his costume was pristine, skin a normal color, pupils sitting at a regular dilation. Even his stance was relaxed, unbothered. Then, the rest of his sentence set in.

“What? Pick me up?” Grian frowned. “How did you know when I’d be getting off work?”

“Oh, I had Boogeyman go in while you weren’t there and steal the login information to your clinic’s scheduling system,” Ringmaster said casually, despite the concerning nature of the statement. “So, it was pretty easy actually.”

“Excuse me?” Grian gaped up at him, crossing his arms. “You did *what?”*

“Nothing,” Ringmaster replied. “Just made everyone’s lives a little bit easier. That’s all.”

Grian felt like his head was about to explode. An invisible man had snuck into his workplace, stolen their classified clinic information, and gotten out completely unbeknownst to them? How was he even

supposed to react to that? Could he go up to Skizz and Mumbo and tell them their login information needed to be changed without drawing suspicion?

No, definitely not. They'd ask questions. Besides, there wasn't anything keeping the Bamboozlers from simply pulling the same trick again. Grian was stuck with this situation. He would have to move on and proceed with his day like he didn't know his job's security was compromised.

The villains had only officially been his sort-of-allies for about a week and he was already running into problems. Grian sighed, shaking his head. "No, you know what? I don't care. What did you need?"

The smile left the other's eyes. "It's Eclipse."

"What? Eclipse? Did something go wrong?" Grian's heart leapt into his throat. "Did her condition take a turn for the worst? How's her oxygen? Is she getting sicker? I thought I'd done enough, but if more is needed—"

"No, no," Ringmaster interrupted, holding up placating hands. "It's not her injury. It's *her.* I think you're the only one who can help."

That was, in the simplest sense, how Grian found himself being blindfolded, loaded into a car, and taken to an unknown destination. According to Ringmaster, they were heading towards the trio's secret headquarters, but he wouldn't say much more until they arrived.

The lack of explanation built up an air of mystery and a sense of dread. He worried over Eclipse's health, worried over this odd place he was being taken to, worried over his own mental stability for agreeing to get in the car with a known criminal to begin with. Grian

was a masterclass in all the things that someone *not* trying to get involved with highly-illegal individuals should avoid doing.

What the vet saw upon arriving at that secretive secondary location was more overwhelming than anything he could've possibly predicted.

"Dude, come on," Boogeyman begged. "Lie down! You *can't* go out yet!"

"I won't be cooped up here for the rest of my life," Eclipse snapped in response, shooting everyone in the room a glare. The towel she'd tied around her head had to be readjusted with each movement. "I can't believe you brought *him* here. Making me hide my identity at home should be a crime."

Grian rocked back and forth on his heels, feeling supremely awkward. The Bamboozlers' base of operations — or the Bam Bunker as they allegedly called it — had turned out to be some sort of underground facility. All of the windows were closed to frosted skylights, and the walls were large and solid.

As for decorations, he'd seen quite the assorted mix while being led through earlier. The blindfold was removed as soon as they'd gone down some sort of elevator, and entered into what looked to be a huge storage area transformed into a home. It was all open concept, with a kitchen in one corner, a training area covered in mats and gym equipment in another, a cushy living room cut off from the rest with bamboo dividers, and then a side hallway leading elsewhere.

Grian had been directed into that hallway by his host, where he heard voices at the end. There were a couple of separate doors, each decorated in differing styles.

“Our bedrooms,” Ringmaster had told him, so he was a little uncomfortable when they came to pause at a bright pink door. They’d knocked, and the loud talking ceased. “We’re coming in.”

Eclipse’s room wasn’t terribly big, but it was better than most apartments Grian had seen in the past. It had enough space to fit a queen sized bed, a dresser, a desk, and a loveseat. All of them were pink, with hints of midnight blue as an accent color. Not exactly how Grian would’ve decorated, but that wasn’t why he’d been brought there that day.

Once inside, the vet had been presented with the issue at hand. Eclipse, who was perched on her bed wearing off-puttingly regular clothes, was apparently causing a bit of a fuss. As Ringmaster informed him, she was insisting that she was well enough to quit her bedrest, and didn’t want to listen when they told her she wasn’t.

“We wouldn’t have to get other people involved if you’d be normal,” Boogeyman sighed. He reached over and flicked the middle of his friend’s forehead, drawing an offended gasp from her. “Grian, tell her!”

Grian was wholly taken aback by the sudden way he was addressed by Boogeyman. The other guy was acting as though he hadn’t threatened him the last time they were alone together. It was jarring, and something he didn’t really know how to handle.

Boogeyman also wasn’t dressed how Grian had expected. Like Eclipse, he was donning casual clothes, just jeans and a t-shirt with his gas mask. There was a little bit of orange dusting on his fingertips, as though he’d just finished eating some cheesy snack when this ordeal had begun. By no means did he or Eclipse look like the terrifying villains depicted on television.

Ringmaster was a refreshing exception — though Grian never thought he'd consider a villain's costume to be *refreshing* — and had gotten properly into uniform to seek him out. Even though the main danger of his arrangement with these three was pretty much nullified with the discovery of his usefulness, it felt necessary to remember who exactly his company was in their free time.

"Well, I would have to take another look at the infection before I could make any definite conclusions," Grian said. Then, to Eclipse specifically, he asked, "Would that be alright?"

Eclipse was the villain he'd interacted with the least. His two times meeting her had both been brief, with the most recent involving her being practically on death's doorstep the entire time. Grian was careful to come across as polite to the best of his ability, unsure if her attitude towards him would be hostile like her teammate's own.

Instead of giving him much of a second thought, though, she shrugged, turned around, and moved herself into a horizontal position. Grian heard Boogeyman and Ringmaster let out matching sighs of relief. He shot them a raised brow, curious if the situation was really dire enough to warrant such reactions. Either way, he came around the side of the bed and gently pulled back the fabric of Eclipse's shirt.

The bandages were in good shape, thankfully, which meant they'd been replaced often. He was glad to see that the three were taking his advice seriously. With practiced hands, he removed the bandages and took in the state of the wound.

Honestly, he was pretty impressed. In only a few days, immense progress had been made. It was pink around the edges, just the right side of red, with a far less noticeably unpleasant scent. A lot of the inflammation and general grossness had gone down.

The chosen antibiotics must've done the trick, even without blood work. They'd gotten lucky. Grian suspected it was also because the wound wasn't particularly deep. Removing the irritation and caring for it properly was all that had been necessary to restore Eclipse to health. Delaying such treatment would've made the whole process so much harder.

Another benefit, since they'd caught it before it could get too much worse, was that they could likely avoid the unfortunate after-effects that came with sepsis as well. He'd keep an eye out for symptoms of post-sepsis syndrome, but for now, both her mood and the healing process were wonderfully average.

"It's looking good. Definitely better," Grian said, slipping his bag off his shoulder. He opted to go ahead and clean it while he was there. "But a little while longer of rest is in order. No removal of the oxygen mask or IV until I can be certain your blood is clear of infection, obviously."

"See! I told you," Boogeyman cheered. His energy, in comparison to five days prior, was way higher and majorly disorienting. "I'm right. You're wrong. Looks like you'll be staying in bed for another week!"

"Well, not exactly," Grian said, trying not to fear for his life as Boogeyman's celebrations were cut off. "She could probably do easy movements right now. Eclipse, you should avoid putting pressure on your back or stretching those muscles too much, but walking around with assistance should be fine. I'm sure you're bored of sitting and doing nothing."

"Thank you, Grian," Eclipse said pointedly. "Hear that? I know my limits, idiot."

Grian dressed the injury, slightly amused by the ridiculous bickering. They were like two little kids, or two mouthy cats yowling back and forth. As soon as he was finished, he stood and turned to Ringmaster. Bag in hand, he started to speak. Unfortunately, a loud gurgling from his stomach interrupted him.

The villain raised an eyebrow, and he flushed, laughing sheepishly, “Sorry, I haven’t had dinner yet.”

“Oh,” Ringmaster gasped, clapping his hands together. “That’s perfect! I can repay your favor from the other day, then.”

“What?” Grian frowned, trying to recall what in the world the other man could be referring to. Finally, he remembered the spaghetti, and he sucked in a breath. “No, uh, really, I can’t trouble you for dinner.”

“Sure you can!” Grian didn’t have a chance to argue as he was taken by the wrist and dragged out of the room. They proceeded down the hall and towards the kitchen area. Ringmaster chatted all the while, “I was thinking of heating up some frozen pizza tonight. Is that alright with you?”

“Uh, I guess,” Grian replied. He glanced over his shoulder to find Boogeyman and Eclipse following behind them. The former was helping the latter, assuring the rolling oxygen tank and IV weren’t badly disrupted. “You guys do know that I can’t eat with you or you’ll have to keep your masks on, right?”

“It’s fine,” Ringmaster decided without much of a second thought. “You’re our guest. It’s important we repay all favors given to us!”

Grian, once again, stole a glance at the other two villains. Eclipse and Boogeyman were exchanging a look, their brows furrowed. The vet

accidentally made eye contact with Boogeyman, and shuddered at the glare he received.

He was led to a kitchen table — a round thing with only three chairs — and pushed into a seat. Awkwardly, he set his bag down on the ground beside him, and glanced at Eclipse and Boogeyman as they settled on either of his sides. Despite the space between them, Grian felt as though he were being crushed between two brick walls from the force of their gazes on his face.

Ringmaster got out a frozen pizza and went through the necessary steps to shove it in the oven.

Eclipse engaged Grian first through the muffled restraints of her oxygen mask, “So, Grian… Can I call you Grian?”

“Um, yes,” Grian replied, extremely aware of every person in the room around him. “That’s fine.”

“Perfect. So, Grian,” she started again. “You saved me.”

The vet glanced between her and Boogeyman. Compared to her neutral expression, Boogeyman’s scrunched face looked a little silly. Clearing his throat, he replied, “I suppose.”

Eclipse tilted her head, pink bangs falling over her raised brows. “I should thank you. I lost track of my care regimen, and it almost went badly.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem,” he insisted.

“Well, I just thought I’d tell you that I do not trust you.” Her eyes crinkled. “But I do respect you for being the only doctor in the city stupid enough to let us into your home. I am eternally grateful and whatnot.”

Though the wording was odd, turning it into something very obviously backhanded, Grian gave a weak smile in return. “Yeah, uh, anytime.”

Clearly sensing the lull in conversation, Ringmaster tossed a look over at him. “Grian,” he started. “How was work today?”

“Good, good,” the vet replied. “Y’know, it's always a nice day when there aren’t many animals coming in.”

Grian let himself taper off, growing quiet. Small talk felt strange in this scenario, since he was not allowed to ask for personal information from any of them. He was walking on glass, every single step threatening to cut his life short. Where was the gray area between too much and just enough?

“So, uh,” he started, throwing caution to the wind. “Do you guys have… pets?”

It felt like a safe enough question. Ringmaster had mentioned his cat once before, so Grian figured that was on the table.

To his relief, Eclipse nodded and replied, “I have a dog called Meri. She’s very cute. Probably cuter than most dogs you see at your job.”

“Oh really?” Grian’s brow twitched at the perpetually off-putting signals he was interpreting from the woman. He opted to glance around instead, focusing on the answer rather than its wording. “Is she anywhere around?”

“No,” Eclipse said, laughing slightly. “She’s back at my house.”

“Back at your house?” The vet frowned. “I thought you lived here.”

“Hm? No, of course not. You think I’d live in a place with this atrocious lighting?” Eclipse scoffed, “It’s just convenient to have. Our missions go late sometimes, so the bedrooms make the downtime nicer. I’m staying here while I rest up so the other two can easily reach me. We all have our own places.”

“Yikes, man,” Boogeyman said, leaning back in his chair. “Can you imagine living here constantly? It’s a glorified basement.”

A glorified basement is *not* how Grian would’ve described the setting, but he did not chime in for his own sake. This base of theirs alone probably cost thousands of dollars to carve out, renovate, hide from prying eyes, and decorate – just from his surface-level observation.

Eclipse hummed, her eyes narrowed and an intonation suggesting underlying intention in the sound. Boogeyman slowly turned towards her. “Is something *wrong* with what I said?”

“Yeah,” Eclipse replied bluntly. “You’re lying. Everyone knows that you thought our base was the coolest thing in the world until you got your roommate a few years ago.”

Grian tilted his head. “Roommate?”

“Okay, alright, that’s enough,” Boogeyman shouted, half collapsing across the table in an attempt to stop her. “We do not need to talk about this *at all.”*

Grian, however, was wholly intrigued. Eclipse seemed more than happy for the chance to poke fun at her friend. She turned fully towards Grian, leaning in like she was trying to be inconspicuous. Though he was still scared of her, his curiosity won over.

“They’ve been living together for three years,” Eclipse went on. “And we’re certain they’re head-over-heels in love with each other, but both of them are too stupid to see it. I’ve never met a couple that acts as married as they do, and they’re not even together.”

“That is *not* true,” Boogeyman screeched. His eyes turned to Grian, pleading. It was a complete switch from his otherwise terrifying villain persona. For the first time, the vet thought he might be getting a glimpse into what these people were actually like when he wasn’t around. “You can’t believe her. She’s lying to defame me!”

“Interesting,” Grian hummed, smile spreading. “And does this roommate of yours know about your career choices?”

“Of course he does,” Eclipse answered before Boogeyman got the chance. “In fact, do you know Zip from the Tuff guys?”

A particular villain came to mind — dramatic, spiky hair, huge red goggles, and a bandana over the lower half of his face.

Grian nodded. “The guy with super speed who runs into walls all the time?”

“Bingo,” Eclipse confirmed. “Yeah, that’s his crush.”

Grian’s brows raised. Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t half as interesting as this. Villains from opposing criminal groups living together, supposedly even having relations with one another? The politics on the battlefield with dynamics like that must be crazy. He knew of several newspapers that would absolutely gobble such juicy information up — not that he would be telling them anything.

“You should see them together, Grian,” Ringmaster said from where he was adjusting the timer on the oven. He had his back towards the group, so Grian couldn’t see his expression past the stretch of his broad shoulders. The pizza was already in, and likely wouldn’t be much longer. “They get super embarrassed and start stuttering. Honestly, it’s kinda gross.”

“Hey!” Boogeyman slammed a hand down on the table, not pleased at the way they were ganging up on him. “Pipe down! I could say something similar about you, but I’ve been holding back. I don’t think you want me to bring up who *you* talk about on a daily basis!”

Ringmaster shot a killer glare over his shoulder, more menacing than Grian had witnessed in a long time. If he didn’t know any better, he would’ve thought the villain was about to lunge at his teammate and try to kill him. It was a lethal, stinging thing, and even Boogeyman shrunk beneath its weight.

Though the reaction from the villain by the oven was terrifying, Grian found his attention rapt. He debated pushing further, prying into areas where he didn’t belong. It wasn’t the best idea, but it sure did sound intriguing — the concept of Ringmaster having a crush, one

apparently too classified for a humble vet to be told about.

Instead of testing his luck, Grian turned to Eclipse and chimed in with a new question, “By the way, that reminds me… Doesn’t Furioso have a crush on you?”

Eclipse stopped dead, eyes going wide. Boogeyman choked out a laugh. Grian heard Ringmaster snort.

“What?” The woman crossed her arms tightly over her chest, still mindful of her IV though. Immediately, her pleasant demeanor took on a defensive edge. “Where did you hear a thing like that? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Grian raised a brow, innocently prodding further, “Then, why are your ears so red?”

Eclipse’s hands shot up to cover the side of her head. “They’re not!”

A bark of laughter was punched out of Boogeyman. He stared at Grian, eyes wide and sparkling. “You noticed that too?” He snickered, “I’ve been telling her for ages that her ears go red whenever he’s brought up. She won’t admit it, but it’s *so* obvious.”

Eclipse saw how much her teammate was enjoying himself, and grew visibly annoyed. Without thinking, she scoffed and blurted, “Oh, grow up, Jimmy!”

The room fell silent. Three heads whipped around to face Eclipse, before the attention shifted slowly to Grian.

Oh *no*.

An accidental slip of the tongue, a damning detail that couldn't be taken back. Eclipse had called Boogeyman by the wrong thing, and every single person present had heard her.

Jimmy?

What kind of supervillain was named *Jimmy?*

Grian couldn't believe his ears. This was more information than any civilian should ever possess in their entire lifetime if they intended to live long and prosper. The Bamboozlers were the three most dangerous criminals in the city, and somehow, he had come to know of one of their names.

His vision blurred, black spots creeping along the edges. All the blood rushed to his head, spinning in time with his racing thoughts.

He was going to die.

And all because of some guy called *Jimmy*.

Wasn't that a pathetic way to go?

No, he absolutely could not sit there and let that happen. Grian refused for such a simple, common name to be the reason he was

wiped off the face of the earth. There were things he still had yet to do, memories he still had yet to make, years he had yet to experience.

He mustered everything within him to crack a smile, and turn towards Boogeyman.

“Your name is Timmy? *Really?”*

It took a second. Boogeyman blinked at him, long and slow. Gradually, Grian’s words set in.

“Timmy? My name’s not—? What?” Boogeyman’s confusion was thick in the air between them. “Did you not just hear—?”

“Hear what? Eclipse calling you Timmy? I did,” Grian said, nodding. “Lame. I was expecting something far more intimidating.”

The three villains were quiet.

Grian glanced between them, swallowing back rising dread. Ringmaster’s gaze was the one he landed on. His green eyes were narrowed and calculating. The trick Grian was implementing wasn’t hard to see through, but at that moment, the vet felt as though his very soul was on display. If this all went wrong and he was murdered, maybe it really would be.

“Grian,” Ringmaster began cautiously. “Did you… genuinely hear the name Timmy?”

Grian's smile faltered. "Of course. How could I not? Eclipse is sitting right here."

A silent conversation of exchanged glances occurred between the three villains. It was impossible for Grian to deduce what they were collectively thinking.

Finally, when it seemed like all hope might be lost, Ringmaster sighed, "Okay, this is silly. Grian, we won't kill you over something as petty as a name."

"Great! Thanks, guys." Grian said, squeezing his hands into fists beneath the table. He gave his best nonchalant nod of acknowledgement to Boogeyman. "Nice to meet you, Tim."

"No, Grian," Ringmaster chuckled. "We know you heard his actual name, and we're not going to do anything. You don't have to pretend."

"Who's pretending? Certainly not me," Grian continued, still far too wound up to stop. "Tim, are *you* pretending? Because I'm definitely not. No idea what he's on about."

Boogeyman — *Jimmy* — gave him the most baffled look physically possible for someone with half their face covered. "Mate," he said. "That's not my name."

"Anyway, Tim," Grian continued. "We got kind of off-topic. Do *you* have any pets?"

The dead air filtering through the atmosphere was suffocating. He bit

the inside of his cheek to keep from cracking. Grian was fairly certain he was one poorly-worded comment away from fully bidding farewell to his sanity forever. He needed the normalcy of this conversation, enough that he could feel the desperation bleeding out of him.

"Uh," Jimmy said. He eyed Grian warily, almost like he was worried about him. "Yeah. Two cats. Listen, I'm not sure I like where you're going with this name business—"

"Great," Grian interrupted. "You have two cats, Ringmaster has a cat, and Eclipse has a dog. Seems like you're all animal lovers around here."

Although Eclipse was matching Jimmy with her utter shock, Ringmaster was smiling at him with those usual crinkles around his eyes. Grian let some of the falseness in his attitude die out underneath the weight of it. He forced himself to relax, to process the situation at hand.

Grian knew a villain's name, but he wasn't going to be killed. That was good. That was progress. He was safe.

"I've got, uh," Grian started up once more, though the manic energy in his speech was lessened. He leaned into the back of his chair to anchor himself. "Two cats as well — Pearl and Maui. I'll try to introduce you next time you're over."

"I'd love to see your cats," Jimmy said, still boasting a slight air of confusion, but coming down from it gradually.

"Oh, yeah, I remember that now. You *do* have pets, don't you?" Ringmaster gasped, "I can't believe I didn't ask to see them when we brought Eclipse."

“Well, you were a bit distracted by your teammate passing out,” Grian suggested, and he got a shrug of agreement from the other man. “But yeah, like I told you, they’re just shy.”

“You two,” Eclipse rasped, adding to the conversation for the first time since she’d accidentally spilled a major secret. She glanced between Ringmaster and Grian, eyes narrowed conspiratorially. “You two have talked about your cats together? In private?”

Grian frowned. “I mean, yeah. It came up. Why?”

“No reason, no reason,” she replied, in a tone that implied there absolutely *was* a reason. She shot Ringmaster a pointed look. “I’ve just heard around the block that being good with cats is the fastest way to a man’s heart.”

Grian blinked, not quite on the same wavelength. “Uh, what?”

He expected to follow Eclipse’s gaze and see Ringmaster sporting a similarly confused countenance, but it was the exact opposite. The icy atmosphere from earlier had returned at full-force, bearing endless pressure down on the woman next to Grian. She didn’t buckle under it like Jimmy had, though. Her amusement just seemed to grow.

“I wonder if Jellie would want any new friends,” Eclipse hummed, propping her chin in her hands. “Maybe a couple of play dates should be arranged. Socialization is good for pets, I’ve heard. It’s healthy for them to spend lots and *lots* of time together.”

The tension in the air grew so thick that Grian felt like he couldn’t breathe. To lighten it, he gave his two cents on what he was picking

up, “I’m not sure *that’s* true.”

Ringmaster paused his relentless death stare to raise a brow. Eclipse lazily turned back around to face Grian. “Oh?”

“There are people who know more about the behaviors of cats than I do,” Grian elaborated. “But I’m pretty certain they don’t fall into the same category as dogs when it comes to socialization. They’re territorial, and most don’t need a load of friends to keep them happy, especially if they have a good relationship with their owners. A playdate or whatever you mentioned wouldn’t likely be successful.”

“Nerd,” Jimmy mumbled.

Grian ignored him. “We *were* talking about him potentially getting a friend for Jellie, right? His cat? The specifics were confusing me.”

“Sure,” Eclipse said, again with that same tone that told him she meant the opposite of what she was speaking into existence. “Sure, yeah. *Jellie* is the one desperately wanting a *friend* right now. Definitely.”

Grian nodded, though he wasn’t sure at all what the conversation had devolved into with the use of such strong subtext.

“Don’t listen to her, Grian,” Ringmaster butted in. The vet, for a moment, thought he saw red blossoming on the tips of the other man’s ears. “She’s loopy from her antibiotics.”

Grian knew that was a lie a million miles away. The brand he’d seen on her side table in her bedroom didn’t have a side effect like that.

Still, he let the topic drop.

A ding came from the oven behind them, and Ringmaster returned to preparing the pizza. Grian's stomach growled embarrassingly loudly at the smell of melted cheese. "Hold on, G," Ringmaster called over his shoulder. "I'll make you a plate right away."

"Of course *Grian* gets to eat first," Jimmy grumbled, and Eclipse nodded sagely. "Stupid favoritism."

"Favoritism?" Grian frowned. He raised his voice just enough for the villain by the stove to recognize it was meant for him. "Are you hearing this? Favoritism?"

"I'm hearing it," Ringmaster confirmed, cutting the pizza into strategic slices. "And it sounds like *Timmy* wants the pieces with the most charred crusts."

"What? No!" Jimmy jumped from his seat and scrambled across the room to try and stop his friend. He got a plate shoved into his arms instead, containing two perfectly overcooked slices. "Oh, man. Grian, look what you've done! I can't even eat these with my mask on. I just get to sit here and imagine how bad they taste."

"If you're so hungry, take it to your room," Ringmaster laughed, bringing two more plates to the table, one for Eclipse and one for Grian. Immediately, the vet started eating, far too hungry to be polite about it.

Eclipse's eyes crinkled. "You want us to go to our rooms, do you? So we're not in your hair anymore?"

Ringmaster swatted her, but didn't answer. He went back to fix himself a plate. Eclipse, by the looks of it, didn't need a response. She had a silent conversation over the table with Jimmy, and the two wordlessly stood, leaving the room.

When Ringmaster moved to come to the table himself, he paused, realizing the new emptiness. The receding squeaky wheels of Eclipse's IV could still be heard down the hall.

"Seems like it's just us now," Grian said. "But you can't eat like this, and I doubt you want to leave me alone in your secret base."

Ringmaster hadn't stepped towards the table, eyes just fixed on Grian. It was a little intimidating, being pinned in place by such a stare. Grian forced a smile, and got to his feet. He had an easy solution, one he would've suggested to the others had they not scrambled off so quickly.

"Let's go to the living room," Grian said, grabbing his plate. "We'll just eat like we did last time."

He was already walking to the area sectioned off by bamboo dividers by the time Ringmaster started to move again. The villain hadn't spoken in awhile, but Grian wasn't bothered. The silence was nice.

The living room area was quaint, with a sectional couch up against the dividers, a coffee table in the middle, and a large television against the wall. There were a handful of posters slapped haphazardly around for decoration, most of them being action shots of certain hero and villain groups. The posters featuring heroes were doodled on heavily. On one, a red marker had given Furioso a ridiculous mustache, and Slayer a goofy smile.

Grian settled himself on the floor in front of the couch, and resumed eating his pizza. He paid no mind to how Ringmaster shuffled in behind him. The television was switched on, presumably by the other man. It flicked between news programs, and eventually landed on one recounting the Tuff Guys' earlier scheming.

Grian heard a hiss and a deep breath from his companion, obviously drinking in the fresh air from having removed his mask. As he spoke, it was devoid of any modulator interference, "There's Zip, Jimmy's crush."

The camera zoomed in on that same goofy motorcycle chase. In the middle was Zip, the speedy villain. He was likely a lot faster than the motorcycle itself was capable of moving, and yet he was committed to riding it with the rest of his gang. They were all total dunces. It made Grian acutely aware of every single ounce of redness that had come to Jimmy's face earlier — all of it was for this man.

"Oh, man," Grian sighed. "This new information is going to make watching the news so much funnier."

"I've met the guy," Ringmaster went on, muffled by a bite. "It's like his team takes all of his IQ away. He's actually really smart when he's not grouped up with them. They all are."

"Really? I've never heard of a team working together to make each other worse," Grian chuckled. "And not even in a successful villainous way. It's almost impressive."

"Well, two wrongs don't make a right," Ringmaster replied, and Grian nodded like the proverb made sense in this context, even though it didn't. Sitting in front of a television and gossiping about stuff like this with Ringmaster was too pleasant for anything else to really bother him. Conversation came more easily without Eclipse or Jimmy

around.

It wasn't devoid of consideration, of course. Grian was more familiar with Ringmaster, but for all intents and purposes, they were still strangers. Until they could mutually learn more about one another without fear of death or a breach of trust, Grian couldn't consider them friends. At most, it was a tentative allyship.

This was nice, though. He could kind of delude himself into comparing this to a hangout with Mumbo, so long as he ignored the fact that turning around meant a swift end to his days. Ringmaster bounced well off him, and had a similar sense of humor. It made it easy to put fear on the backburner.

Grian finished his pizza, and waited until the conversation tapered to a close.

"I should get going," he told the villain. "My cats will be vying for food right about now, and I told my neighbor I'd be home in time to feed them."

"Right," Ringmaster said. "Right, yes, of course."

He shuffled around, and Grian waited to hear the telltale click and hiss of the mask falling back into place. Neither of them moved for a moment, and then Ringmaster cleared his throat.

"Okay, let's get you home."

Grian was led back to the exit and blindfolded. They drove in relative silence, with the vet entertaining himself by counting how many

potholes his companion hit. Ringmaster took off the eye covering once he deemed them far enough away, and they bid farewell. Grian was left on a sidewalk in an area he recognized instantly.

By the time the vet got home, he was both tired and endlessly curious. The company he kept nowadays wasn't conventional, and the situation he'd gotten himself into wasn't what a normal person might consider ideal, but it made the emptiness of his apartment that much more evident.

In comparison to the Bamboozlers' headquarters, which had activity and noise the entirety of the time he was there, his place was so *quiet.*

Once Pearl and Maui were satiated with food, it was especially clear. The only noise was from his television. It felt lonely, not at all like the incessant bickering and gossiping from before. Everything was too big, too devoid of something he couldn't really name.

Grian sighed, collapsing onto his couch. Silence was odd, but it was what he'd lived with for his entire life. Whatever bothersome feelings he was having at the moment would surely pass with a good night's rest. Though it wasn't the most comfortable, Grian let his eyes fall shut, and his consciousness drifted away upon his couch.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY TUESDAY!

How did we feel about a 13k word chapter? It was supposed to just be 9k but I spent all of yesterday reworking some stuff and it just so happened to add 4k on. Either way, I'm happy with how it came out! Progress is being made, we're seeing some familiar faces, really we can only go up from here!

Thanks again for the amazing support. Without you all, I wouldn't have had the motivation to make this possible. Thanks, as always, to my beloved beta readers, Cody and Smiif, who had a day's

notice to read 13k words and absolutely crushed it.

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! See you next Tuesday!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

There's an exciting announcement at the end of this chapter!

Please enjoy the next 17k words with that in mind!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fear, as it turned out, was something that could quite easily grow to be less intense with repeated exposure.

Logically, Grian had been aware of this fact for a long time. It was a key part of his job, after all. Over the years, his clinic had received countless strays from off the streets with a dislike for humans. Most of them were traumatized, or feral, with few positive experiences.

In direct correlation to the clinic's constant care and a reliable patience from the staff, he'd watched as those same types of discarded animals gradually emerged from their shells and learned that there was nothing scary about the people overseeing them. Not all of them were prone to this behavioral switch, but a grand majority of them could get there eventually.

However, Grian had never expected to notice similar shifts within *himself*.

The Bamboozlers were a trio of terrifying individuals. It was an undisputed fact. Grian knew it, his coworkers knew it, the heroes knew it, the media knew it, everyone knew it. They were some of the city's most fearsome villains, and they'd earned that title by reinforcing the idea for years with jaw-dropping precision.

Upon searching their name on literally any social media platform, one

could find hundreds of clips of them wreaking havoc throughout the city over the course of several years. And it wasn't just the group that had built up such infamous reputations either – each individual member had their own circulation of rumors, their own list of crimes, their own brand of horror through which they tormented their victims.

Eclipse, for example, was ruthlessly efficient in battle. She was agile, and deadly with her spear. When her power was available to her, it blinded indiscriminately. She was reportedly impossible to predict in her movements, as well as scarily good at predicting the movements of those around her in turn.

Heroes of a lower level couldn't be trusted to face her and come out alive. Even if they might be able to handle her in a fight, her powers required her enemy to have a strong will, for it was rumored the inky blackness of her blinding ability was unbelievably claustrophobic. A handful of civilians had been caught in it once during a hostage situation, and the Agency apparently compensated them handsomely for the experience. If an alert was sent out, and an opponent was deployed to deal with her, only the best would do.

Boogeyman, secondly, was unbeatable in terms of stealth. His powers had few limitations, allowing him to break into places undetected, slip around battlefields unseen, strike from behind when least expected. He was someone security systems couldn't hope to keep out, and the Agency couldn't fully protect against.

When it came to going toe-to-toe with him, paranoia was a factor he exploited perfectly. Being his opponent was a constant struggle to listen, anticipate, and track down someone a regular person could not. At all points in time, any steps taken could be mirrored by an invisible other, any path forward could be walked by an unknown second, any password typed could be seen by alternative eyes. If someone were to end up on Boogeyman's radar, they had to be ready to never be comfortably alone again.

Lastly, there was Ringmaster. He was a hard-hitter, specializing in sudden bursts of powerful attacks. He was secretive and strong, but he didn't need to rely on fear in the form of stealth like his teammates. The ominous red glow of a power unknown to the world was enough to get a city block evacuated. A punch from his fist was said to deal twice the damage. A kick from his boot was said to break twice as many bones. A glare from behind his mask was said to drop the temperature by thirty degrees.

Though he wasn't as hard to strike as Eclipse or as difficult to find as Boogeyman, there was an intimidation in his presence alone. Heroes could be trusted to go into a fight with him wielding the most baseline understanding of self defense, but they were rarely able to emerge unscathed, no matter their skill level. If a brave soul were to truly manage to force Ringmaster into a corner, there was no telling what would happen to them.

Not much was known, in actuality, about the group's specific goals. The experts at the Agency could try to understand the thought process behind why the Bamboozlers might target a certain bank or business, but only *after* the attack had occurred. There was never an indication on where they would strike next, when the attack would happen, or why it would take place to begin with. They seemed to be agents of chaos and little else, pocketing some valuables, but still leaving enough behind to be questionable.

To find out even one thing about them that the media considered a great mystery would be enough to set a person up for a lifetime. It would revolutionize the way the media was able to look upon their battles, and change the perspective of the city's analysts forever.

Grian wasn't much interested in change. The politics of that side of the city didn't concern him. The fear and excitement of heroes and villains didn't concern him. Nothing beyond the spiralling consequences of the actions he'd taken in an alleyway weeks prior concerned him. It just so happened to have gotten a bit more personal in recent days.

Of course, the fear he kept in his heart hadn't disappeared overnight. Rather, it'd been eased out of him, similar to the careful way a person might wade into a rushing river – slowly at first, and then faster once they were confident.

Grian kept himself in the shallows for the time being, but he'd very much so dipped his feet in. Even as there were threats of being carried away, he'd begun to find simple joy in the coolness of the water.

The first time he noticed himself becoming less bothered by the existence of these criminals was actually during an interaction that lasted for only a split second. Grian was walking home from the grocery store, arms full of overflowing bags, when he noticed a crowd gathered on the street ahead.

Now, he was a curious guy. Never once had he denied this truth, even as it put him in endless situations throughout his life. Though he was already struggling to keep up with the amount of bags cutting off his circulation, he couldn't help but hobble himself over in that direction, just to see what was up.

It wasn't until he'd made it to the edge of the gathering that Grian was able to glimpse the person at the center of it. To his surprise, he saw a *hero* there.

Slayer was easily identified by her bun of bright red hair atop her head, braided through with leaves and a handful of flowers. The green mask over her eyes hid her identity while she chatted with a reporter – a well-dressed woman with a fashionable bob.

There was caution tape along the windows of the building behind her. Whispers from the crowd spoke of a few thieves having been caught

minutes prior. Not much more could be picked out from where Grian lingered.

That was enough, however, for him to decide he wasn't interested in sticking around. His curiosity died in his chest, an uncomfortable indifference filling its hole in his chest. He didn't care to find out why she was loitering in the street for this interview, or why the general public felt like blocking the whole of the sidewalk to observe her.

Maybe the version of himself from a couple of weeks prior might've stuck around, watched long enough to understand what was going on. He'd never kept up with the news, but it was rare to bump into a hero like this, especially near his neighborhood. It was practically a celebrity appearance, and any civilian would be likely to find some interest in the experience.

Unfortunately, *this* version of himself didn't care one singular bit. In fact, all he felt in lieu of interest was a wave of exhaustion – like the very sight of someone in a flashy costume was calling him to action, and he was not keen on responding.

Grian turned on his heel, intending to walk away, but there were a large number of people tripping over themselves to get as close to Slayer as possible. He was forced to dodge around the onslaught, made more difficult by the collection of bags in his grip. No one paid him the simplest bit of care, too focused on taking his spot as he left.

It was almost inevitable for a careless elbow to jam into his side, and for his balance to fail him. Grian landed hard against the pavement, his bags breaking the majority of his fall. He heard a sickening crack in the midst of the chaos.

Grian laid there for a moment in shocked disbelief. No one came to help him, or spared him a glance. They had their eyes set on the hero

at the center of the crowd, who could just barely be heard speaking from where he had collapsed. If he turned his head at just the right angle, he could vaguely make out the legs of both her and the reporter interviewing her.

"So, Slayer," the reporter began. While listening, Grian sat up and sighed at the sight of his groceries scattered across the sidewalk. "Tell us a little bit about your victory today."

"There's not a whole lot to say, honestly," Slayer piped up. "I was lucky to be in the area when our crime alerts were made aware of the robbery, and I apprehended them before they could get away."

"That's wonderful to hear," the reporter said, giving a polite laugh before she could prompt further. "I'm sure I speak for the whole city when I say that we're grateful for your contributions towards keeping us all safe."

Grian wished her contributions had included protecting his eggs too. He held up the box of broken shells, their yolks dripping out onto the ground and baking in the sun. His bread was also squished, definitely useless for any amount of sandwich making he might want to do over the next few days. He cursed to himself, remembering the annoyingly high price on his receipt.

"Although, Slayer, if you don't mind me asking," the newscaster chimed again. "How did you manage to capture the robbers without so much as a single scratch on yourself?"

"Well, it's not too difficult with powers like mine," Slayer hummed. "I'm sure you know, but my ability – Radar, as I like to call it – allows me to sense a person's presence around myself whenever it's activated. It helps predict attacks, find people trying to hide from me, and stuff like that. Regular opponents are no match."

Grian perked up a bit at that.

Though it was, as she'd said, known to the greater public, it was still a factor he'd forgotten until now. Heroes didn't tend to keep their skills a secret, with the exception of their weaknesses. However, if he thought about it, that meant his first technical encounter with her in the alleyway could've gone a lot differently if she'd activated her powers. It was a nearer miss than he'd originally realized.

The vet shook himself out of it, ignoring the pang of old fear that shot through him. That time had passed. That danger had moved along. That alleyway was behind him, even if his future still involved the same cast of characters. It was easy to rationalize himself along, especially if he focused on how frustrating it was to shove all of his things back in their bags.

"And would you mind explaining to the crowd what exactly your crime alerts entail?" The reporter clarified, "Isn't it important for all civilians to know how to ring one in?"

"Yes. Crime alerts are provided to us by civilians such as yourselves, and double-checked by our professionals back at the Agency," Slayer said, switching into a voice that sounded vaguely practiced, like these were lines she repeated often. "Remember, folks. Your report could be the difference between a devastating villain attack or a successful capture. Don't hesitate to reach out."

"Very true! Well said, Slayer," the woman laughed. "Do we know who exactly called in the alert today? Can we get a special shout-out for that helpful soul?"

Slayer didn't respond immediately, seemingly thinking over the

question thoroughly. Finally, when she did pipe up once more, she sounded a little uncertain. “We *aren’t* actually sure. It was a guy, and all he said was that the petty criminals were starting to get a little too close for his tastes. Whatever *that* means…”

“Well, we won’t keep you any longer,” the reporter said, tone changing to indicate a sense of finality. Slayer bid farewell to the woman, and then presumably also to the crowd, if their cheers were worthwhile indicators. Grian rushed to grab the last of his items before unobservant feet could land on his surviving groceries.

Eventually, there was only one thing remaining just a little ways beyond his reach. Grian leaned forward, not catching sight of movement out of the corner of his eyes. He wasn’t expecting a man to kneel down and grab his box of cereal. Their hands brushed as they both took hold of it, and Grian muttered, “Oh, I think I’ve got it. Thank you, though.”

The vet glanced up to see who exactly had finally come to assist him, but the man’s face was tipped down and blocked by a hoodie. Grian tilted his head, trying to steal a glimpse, only to be thwarted when the stranger shifted backwards.

“No problem,” came a voice from the other’s general direction. Grian tensed, eyes growing wide. “Be more careful in the future, alright?”

The vet was frozen solid, unable to move or so much as attempt to watch the mysterious man stand. He heard the sound of receding footsteps, but still couldn’t draw himself fully into the present. Mostly because Grian *knew that voice.*

And it didn’t belong to some random civilian.

He jerked his head to the side just in time to catch the briefest notion of Ringmaster's retreating back as he disappeared into the crowd. Grian was left in the middle of the sidewalk with several bags of retrieved groceries, and a whole lot of confusion.

Notably, though, he didn't feel any fear. His bewilderment was far too poignant for him to process anything outside of it. That had been too quick, too normal, too all-around simple of an interaction for it to have sent anything towards his fear receptors.

Maybe it would set in later, but right then, it was completely absent.

Grian was eventually able to move on and get to his apartment alright. That hypothetical 'later' never came.

Several more days passed without much out of the ordinary. He did see the Bamboozlers, but it was for a brief visit in between long shifts, so he didn't discuss much with them. The Agency hinted on working on some new classified project behind the scenes, a dog park was opened a few blocks from him, and a new documentary on the secret life of heroes was released. The film was just fine, but nothing to write home about.

The Tuff Guys also had another heist – likely to make up for the money they'd recently realized had been lost – and it was slightly more successful. They didn't go for a bank again this time. Instead, they'd ducked into a large tech store after hours and made off with a bunch of really expensive equipment. There was no telling what exactly they'd be doing with it, but the news speculated that pawn shops would be getting a lot of attention soon.

It sounded simple on paper, another robbery made possible by their incredible abilities. However, in actuality, nothing was ever truly simple with the Tuff Guys.

The second they'd arrived at the store, the white-haired villain in a strange ninja costume by the name of Cyclone had gotten right to work. He'd used his wind powers to throw his giant hammer through the front window at full force.

According to security footage, the three of them had not apparently expected this violent break-in to trigger the alarm system in the slightest.

From what the newscaster reported, analysts were pretty sure the group had been planning on Tripwire utilizing his time-stop powers to catch the shrieking alarm before it could even begin. Muffled conversation from the video revealed as much. Due to what police were calling an 'egregious lack of communication,' though, Cyclone had gotten a little ahead of himself and blown the whole situation up.

They'd all panicked at the same time, scampering into the store to grab what they could before law enforcement arrived.

Zip ran frantically across the city multiple times with several bags worth of technology thrown over his shoulder, while the cameras continued to watch Tripwire and Cyclone fumble around to grab whatever they saw. The speedy villain's response made enough sense. For the latter two, though, their flight or fight seemed to be a little buggy.

Cyclone had, on several occasions, accidentally fired off bursts of wind, knocking several tables worth of priceless equipment onto the ground. Each of those times, Tripwire rushed to try and catch said equipment with his abilities before they could shatter. Unfortunately, due to his costume — which consisted of a full-body ghillie suit and the most massive pair of tinted goggles the world had ever seen — he kept missing his target and hitting Cyclone instead.

It was a bit of a continuous loop of the speedster ringing in all the profit where he could, and the less agile two destroying the rest. Zip wasn't without incidents of his own though. Once or twice, a burst of wind closed the door to the building right as he was running through, causing him to slam face-first into it. At the very least, he could claim it wasn't his fault.

Despite their brash and hard to watch methods, Grian had to give them props. The second the heroes arrived on the scene, the trio had scattered, successfully evading capture. Zip, of course, just had to run off to get away, but Cyclone and Tripwire also disappeared from view with startling efficiency.

One might expect a ninja to be able to disappear into the shadows, especially when a single gust from his powers could rocket him out of reach, but the fact that Tripwire too had gotten away was really impressive. Grian hadn't anticipated a walking, human-shaped bush to be able to blend into urban environments as well as he apparently did.

The newscaster was equally as surprised to report their escape as all her viewers were to hear it, if her wide eyes and slightly confused smile were any indication. The Tuff Guys were, however, a professional villain group, even if they bumbled around a bit. They might not strike terror into the hearts of their enemies, but they weren't incapable of success. Sometimes the city had to be reminded of that fact.

And on the topic of fear, it was actually as Grian was watching the program unfold with rapt interest that he received a knock on the door to his apartment. He was not expecting at all to see Jimmy, dressed in his Boogeyman costume, lingering in his hallway. He expected even less to have a fluffy dog shoved into his arms without warning.

“Grian,” Jimmy gasped, vocal modulator fluctuating to keep up with his heaving breaths. “Can you do me a favor and watch Eclipse’s dog for a bit?”

“Eclipse’s dog?” Grian struggled to keep the wiggly, cotton-ball-shaped animal from squirming out of his arms. He glanced down at the thing, frowning. “Is this Meri?”

“Yeah, you know,” Jimmy said, gaze darting around constantly to check that no other tenants were leaving their rooms. “I figured that you’re probably pretty good at taking care of animals, and I have something *really* important that I need to do, so…”

“Timmy,” Grian started, eyes narrowing. “Why aren’t you asking Ringmaster to watch her? Why did you come to me?”

Jimmy flinched. “Oh, well… He has a cat, and I didn’t want to—“

“I have cats too,” Grian cut him off to say. “Remember? You made me show you a picture of them when I came over to remove Eclipse’s IV the other day.”

“Um, yeah. That does, uh, sound familiar, actually,” Jimmy trailed off. “Silly mistake, I guess.”

Grian noticed a pale blush had settled itself over the visible parts of his face. Suddenly, as he recalled the earlier news program, some things clicked into place. A wicked grin came over his face, and before he could debate if it was wise to tease a dangerous criminal without anyone around to help him, he’d already blurted, “You’re going to go see Zip, aren’t you?”

Jimmy's eyes grew wide enough that the vet worried they might fall out of his skull. Grian had gotten it exactly right.

The villain pushed him further into his apartment and shut the door. Then, he leaned against it, skin so red he looked like he was actively catching on fire. "You can't tell the others that I'm doing this."

"Why not?" Grian frowned. Gently, he set Meri down on the ground. The dog, apparently overjoyed by her new surroundings, immediately bounded off to explore. He sent a silent prayer up to whomever might be watching that Pearl and Maui weren't in a fighting mood at the moment. "What's so wrong about going to see your roommate?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong. It's just—!" Jimmy shifted from foot to foot awkwardly, not finishing his sentence.

Grian didn't need him to. "You're worried they'll tease you!"

"No! I am *not* worried about that!" Jimmy crossed his arms, probably attempting to hide the fact that he was absolutely lying through his teeth. "I don't want them to call me irresponsible. It was my job to house-sit and watch Meri, and I know they'll call me a slacker if I don't. That's all!"

"Mhm, sure," Grian said, feeling terribly smug. "Well, as long as you're back before midnight, I'm perfectly happy to watch Meri for you."

"Really?" Jimmy perked up. "Genuinely? You'd do that for me?"

"Of course," the vet doubled down.

“Oh, thanks, Grian,” Jimmy cheered, throwing his hands up. He fumbled for something in his pocket and handed him a bunched-up leash, as well as a small bag of treats. “If she misbehaves, a quick walk around the block will tire out her little legs, and these treats will distract her from anything if she starts bothering your cats.”

“Thanks, Tim,” Grian chuckled. He tilted his head to the side, and lowered his voice just enough for the other to hear him. “Now, why don’t you run along and give your roommate a big congratulatory kiss? I’m sure he’s waiting with bated breath.”

Jimmy stumbled, tripping forward and catching Grian by the shoulders. The vet was pretty sure he could see steam rising from his companion’s ears. Then, in a blur of movement, Jimmy was reaching down and removing something from the sheath on his thigh. Grian’s smile grew the slightest bit more strained as he felt metal pressed up against his throat.

He raised his hands, laughing nervously. “Alright! Too far, I get it!”

Jimmy pulled the knife away and straightened. He still looked a mess, all frazzled and red, but Grian could see he was thinking about other things now. “I’ll be back soon. Remember not to tell the others.”

Grian gave a final nod, and watched as the villain left. Then, it was just him, a dog he’d never met before, and his two cats left in the apartment. However, amongst the things that lingered in his space, there was not a single semblance of remaining fear.

It was a baffling thing. Aside from the briefest moment that he’d been threatened, not even Jimmy – the Bamboozler who was oftentimes the most hostile towards him – had elicited much of a negative response.

Even when the man returned a few hours later to retrieve Meri, Grian didn't so much as shiver once during their interaction.

A few more days passed with equivalently little going on. He'd learned that silence existed to be broken. Oftentimes sooner rather than later.

In light of everything, the vet wasn't really surprised to walk into his apartment after a late-night shift and see a man lingering in the middle of the room. A regular person might've screamed, their heart might've skipped a beat, and they might've feared for their lives. Grian simply flipped on the nearest lamp, and said, "Hello, Ringmaster. What brings you by tonight?"

The villain smiled at him with that usual crinkle-eyed gaze of his, and then held a finger up in front of his mask. Grian raised a brow, but did not speak again. He kicked off his shoes, set down his bag, and crept in silently to stand next to the other man.

Ringmaster pointed somewhere further into his home, where Grian noticed his cats entering through the threshold of the room. Likely, they'd heard their owner return and come to beg for extra food, despite Grian's neighbor having already given them their dinner.

Through a series of silent gestures, Grian learned that his two pets were the villain's current fixation. He vaguely mimed the act of petting them, demonstrating his intentions. For the entirety of the process, Ringmaster remained quiet, determined not to scare the little furballs off.

As much as Grian respected the endeavor, there was quite an easy solution to what would otherwise take hours of them remaining still as a statue. He snuck into the kitchen and opened a pack that was typically saved for special occasions.

After the rustling of said pack had been heard by the kitties, Grian didn't have to be stealthy on his way back. Pearl and Maui's swishing tails and bright eyes could be seen from a mile away.

"Here," Grian said, handing the villain two sticks of lickable treats. "Doesn't matter if you're a stranger just as long as you're holding those. They'll abandon all their morals for them."

"Abandoning morals," Ringmaster echoed. He seemed skeptical, but he took the treats anyway and knelt down. "I can respect that, I guess."

Exactly as Grian had told the villain they would, the two cats galloped towards him. Pearl tackled Maui to get to the stick in Ringmaster's right hand first, forcing her brother to go for his left and lag a few seconds behind.

The villain gasped, voice modulator struggling to keep up with the endless string of cooing that tumbled from his mouth. "Oh, aren't you both just the sweetest little things! Yes you are, yes you are! Grian, look!"

"I can see," Grian replied, smiling. He sat himself on the couch, watching the interaction with undisguised fondness. It was a ridiculous sight — the city's biggest, baddest villain dissolving into a puddle over the affections of two standoffish cats. "They like you."

"Don't say that," Ringmaster said, words cracking. "I'll start crying. I love them so much already. I'd *kill* for them."

Grian had no doubt he would. Observing a bit closer, it was obvious

Ringmaster had recently gotten into a fight, though it hadn't been televised as far as he was aware. The man's knuckles were bloody and bruised. Whatever he'd been doing, he'd given it his all.

Rather than wait around, the vet opted to get a headstart on what he already knew would be asked of him. He grabbed his bag from beside the door, and his first aid kit from the bathroom. Once his supplies were gathered, he sat on the floor beside the other man.

It took some coaxing, but eventually he convinced Ringmaster to drop one of the treats so that Grian could tend to his hand. While cleaning the various little wounds, the vet's mind wandered.

He realized that this was the first time he'd caught the other alone since their chance encounter in public not long ago. There were still questions stirring in his gut about that day, intrigue spiking when he thought of digging deeper. With only a mild amount of eagerness, he soon found himself asking, "So, you hang around heroes while they do interviews often, or was that a one-off thing for you?"

Ringmaster cleared his throat. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

It was a definite statement, spoken with finality. There was something new in the way he held himself, though – a fidget he'd unconsciously started doing the second the words were out of his lips. They were quick, repetitive motions, like tapping his finger against the treat or blinking the slightest bit faster.

It was the sort of guilty motion that might give away a *liar*.

Not that the vet needed any confirmation on what he knew to be true.

“Mhm, sure,” Grian huffed. “Thanks for helping with my groceries, by the way.”

The villain slumped, his fidgeting stopping abruptly. He recognized that the jig was up and looked away from the cats just long enough to eye Grian. “Was I that obvious?”

“You literally spoke to me,” the vet said. “Do you think I don’t know your voice?”

“I took a chance,” Ringmaster grumbled. “I wasn’t expecting to see you at all.”

“And I wasn’t expecting to see *you* either,” Grian replied. “Why were you there?”

“Just had to make sure my phone call was heard.” Ringmaster reached over and scratched behind Maui’s ear. The cat, distracted by the treat, let him. “I don’t like it when little pests start wandering into places they shouldn’t be.”

Grian’s head shot up, eyes widening. “You were the anonymous caller?”

“Maybe,” Ringmaster said. “Maybe not. That’s classified.”

Grian clamped his mouth shut, but his mind spun. His recollection of that day became a whole lot more distorted. In an attempt to cling to some semblance of normalcy, he asked, “What were you up to

tonight?"

"Also classified, technically," Ringmaster replied, his eyes crinkling more at the cats shoving one another aside. "But I was doing reconnaissance for a future mission. Once Eclipse is better, we're gonna finish what we planned to do on the night she passed out."

"Sounds fun," Grian hummed. "Although, I'm curious. What kind of reconnaissance requires you to punch brick walls? Your hands are a mess."

Ringmaster laughed. "No, uh, I had a run-in with a few cops on my way home. My grappling hook jammed, so I had to get physical."

"Hm, sorry to hear that." Grian gave the palm in his hold a little squeeze, and got one back. "These aren't bad, though. They'll heal quickly."

"Yeah," Ringmaster said. Grian switched to cleaning his other hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you over something so little. I was actually here to ask if you could wrap my leg."

"Your leg?" Grian glanced down, but couldn't see anything from this angle. It would have to wait until after this second hand was done. "What happened?"

"One of the cops had a switchblade," Ringmaster explained. "Didn't see it until I was aiming a kick at his head, and, well…"

He didn't have to finish that sentence. Grian could guess where that landed them. The hand became a much quicker job with the

motivation of something bigger to tackle, being cleaned in just a few minutes. From there, because Ringmaster refused to get off the floor where the cats were, the two of them maneuvered so the leg in question was extended and placed in Grian's lap.

The vet was quick to move aside the torn pants fabric and take a closer look. Thankfully, it wasn't very deep, and had already stopped the majority of its bleeding. The thing would hurt for a while, though, so treating it was best. Ringmaster wasn't wrong to come to him.

Grian didn't have to do much aside from cleaning and wrapping this injury too, but he took his time with it. Ringmaster spoke in a twisted baby voice to his pets for the entire duration. After a while, Maui even curled up by his side. Grian thought his companion might burst into flames from that alone. As Pearl let him pet her for a few seconds, that explosion of energy got worse.

"Grian, I *have* to kidnap your cats," Ringmaster said, sniffling. "They're just too cute. How am I supposed to leave them?"

"Try it, and I'll break your leg right here," Grian replied, only half-joking. "I'll make you hobble all the way home."

Ringmaster laughed, a glisten to his eye. "Don't threaten me with a good time. I'd *love* to see you being violent."

"Okay, freak, calm down," Grian grumbled.

"Fine," the villain chuckled. "I guess you can keep your cats for now. Jellie wouldn't like such sudden guests anyway. She's not feeling well at the moment."

“Oh yeah?” Grian glanced up. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing too serious, but she’s not eating as much and she’s sneezing a lot,” Ringmaster replied, fingers ghosting over Pearl’s back as she rubbed against him. “I changed her food recently. I hope she’s not allergic to it.”

“Hm, maybe you should take her to the vet if that persists,” Grian said, turning his attention downward again. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Ringmaster tilt his head.

“Yeah,” the villain said. “Maybe I should.”

No words were exchanged for a few more minutes. The silence might’ve continued for longer, but Grian adjusted the way he was sitting and accidentally bumped against his companion’s leg. It drew a hiss from him.

“Sorry,” Grian said. “That’s what you get for talking about kidnapping my cats, though. The universe gets justice in mysterious ways.”

“See, it’s when you’re mean that I consider what you’d be like as a villain. You have the right attitude for it,” Ringmaster pointed out, amusement twinkling in his gaze. “What do I have to do to get you to come on one little heist with me? Pretty please?”

“God, no. I am neither fit enough nor bored enough to give in to that peer pressure,” Grian scoffed. “Plus, I’m already stressed with just my regular job. First, Timmy makes me into some unpaid dogsitter for Meri, and now *you* want more from me too? Absolutely not.”

“Wait a minute,” Ringmaster said, and the vet instantly realized his mistake. “Jimmy did *what?”*

Grian winced, silently sending up an apology to Jimmy. Poor guy was going to need it, since he had no intention of lying to Ringmaster’s face. “Yeah, the other day, Tim left Meri at my place, made me dogsit.”

Ringmaster stared unblinkingly at him, brows raised and eyes wide.

“Jimmy visited you *alone* without telling any of us. That’s so… interesting,” the villain said, an unreadable tint to his vocal modulator. “And, uh, *why* exactly did he pass Meri off?”

“He didn’t want to leave her alone,” Grian explained, not too keen on leaving details out while he was being specifically asked for them. Jimmy should’ve paid him or something if he wanted total confidentiality. “It was after the Tuff Guys did that big heist. He wanted to congratulate Zip.”

“Good to know, good to know,” Ringmaster said, his eyes crinkling the slightest bit more. He was smiling, but somehow, Grian thought it looked more malicious in nature. Poor Jimmy.

The vet sighed, figuring he might need to step in just a little bit. “Don’t give him too much trouble, or else I won’t hear the end of it. He told me not to tell you.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” Ringmaster hummed. “Jimmy is perfectly capable of defending himself. I’m sure he knew I’d find out eventually.”

Grian gave a small grunt back in response, though he wasn't actually appeased in the slightest. Ringmaster had misunderstood him – the vet wasn't worried for Jimmy's sake. It was his own self preservation instincts that had attempted to get the villain off his friend's case.

But that appeared to be a useless endeavor. Ringmaster was already visibly plotting the best ways to use this information to his advantage, totally unaware of the ramifications it might have on the messenger of such things. Grian would just have to deal with the pushback of accidentally revealing the secret.

Content silence filtered between them, broken up only by purring from the kitties. Ringmaster calmed, simply watching the vet work. The treats had run out, and now Pearl and Maui were beginning to grow distant again.

Grian tied off the last bandage, pausing to take in his finished job. A moment passed with nothing to fill it. Both of them came to a similar realization that Ringmaster didn't have a reason to stick around anymore. And yet, neither moved.

The villain cleared his throat, redirecting the topic away from that. "So, Doctor, I'm curious… Do you happen to know any self-defense?"

"Why? Are you planning something I should be prepared to fight off?" Grian teased, "Because the answer is no, but I'm sure I could take *you* pretty easily."

He got a disbelieving scoff for his bold statement. "Really?"

"Really," Grian said, doubling down. It might've been unwise, but the energy in the room felt comfortable, open to this sort of banter. The vet easily forgot their individual reputations as he poked at the

bandaged leg still in his lap, enjoying how it was jerked away immediately. “You’re so constantly covered in injuries that you’ve got, like, a million weak spots.”

“Weak spots don’t do as much as you think they do,” Ringmaster said, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m too big and strong for them to matter.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Grian lunged forward, and Ringmaster screeched, falling backwards. The vet cackled as he dug his fingers into the other man’s side, where he knew there was soft, newly healed skin. The effect was instantaneous, the screaming increasing in volume.

It wasn’t enough to seriously hurt, but it clearly felt incredibly uncomfortable if Ringmaster’s frantic squirming was any indication. He was kicking his feet so much that Grian had to swing his leg over and sit himself on the other’s knees to keep from getting randomly hit.

“Ow, okay! Stop, please, please,” the villain begged. “I give up! I give up!”

His hands shot out and caught Grian by his wrists. The vet shrieked as he was yanked forward, away from the old wound and his center of balance. Grian toppled forward, grunting as his chest was pressed into Ringmaster’s own, and their foreheads bumped together.

The vet hissed, sitting up a bit to rub at his skin. “Is your face made of *rocks?* That hurt, man.”

“Sorry,” Ringmaster whispered, but his tone had changed. He sounded out of breath, distant. Grian glanced over, and found the other was already staring at him. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated, and chest rising and falling slowly. From what could be seen of his face, he was very red.

The vet frowned. He shuffled a bit and pressed the back of his hand to Ringmaster’s forehead. “Something the matter? You’re really warm.”

“Huh? Oh, um,” Ringmaster stammered. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You’re acting weird.” Grian sat up a little more, but his companion did not follow. He just stayed down, gaze shifting up to rest on the ceiling. “Did you hit your head?

“Uh, maybe a little,” Ringmaster admitted.

“Shoot, sorry,” Grian said. “Let me go get you an ice pack.”

He got off the ground and quickly popped into the kitchen. It took him a second to find his bag of frozen peas, but by the time he’d returned to the living room, it was empty. His window was open, and Ringmaster was gone.

Grian felt his heart squeeze behind his ribs. He bit his tongue, and let the mild disappointment wash over him, though he wasn’t entirely sure why it was there. This had always been the arrangement, always been how these visits went. As soon as the villains were fixed up, they

had no reason to stick around. It was his fault for expecting otherwise.

The quiet of the apartment crept along his skin, enveloping him in the most unpleasant way. He went about his evening. No use dwelling on what couldn't be amended.

About twelve hours after Ringmaster fled his apartment, Grian found himself at the clinic. He had arrived rested, rejuvenated, and ready for the day ahead. What had met him was a never-ending workload. He barely got a moment to breathe, let alone dwell on the previous night's events.

Now, Grian wouldn't have considered himself a particularly fantastic liar for the majority of his life. He could pull off a few half-truths, but more than that and things became shaky. With the introduction of villains into his circle, however, his skills had evolved slightly. Given there was a whole part of himself that he was often required to hide from his colleagues, he'd been forced to improve.

On this specific day, his newly-developed talent was put to the test.

Mumbo and Grian had both broken away from the chaos of the clinic. They'd holed themselves up by the kennels to get away from the steady stream of people, if only for a mere moment. The vet techs would fetch them as soon as they were needed, but until then, they were completely content to just go through routine checks with the animals in their care instead.

His friend had started on the other end of the row to make the process a bit quicker. Grian was busy checking over the file of a puppy in their care that had been diagnosed with demodectic mange. The sweet angel – a small black lab that had ended up in their care after being discovered on the side of the road by a couple of passersby – was

quick to run up to him as he opened the kennel.

The vet handled her with care, all too aware of the swollen spots and lesions scattered over her skin. The tiny thing was doing better since she'd arrived in their clinic two weeks prior, but she still had quite a ways to go. Once she was cleared, they'd hand her off to the shelter down the road to find a loving home.

Just judging by her behavior around Grian and the other staff, he suspected she'd be an ideal dog for a family with children. She never bit any of them, loved playing for hours, and would fall asleep in the laps of any techs with enough time to sit themselves on the floor. The bald spots caused by her alopecia made her look a little lopsided, but in his opinion, that was part of her charm.

She was due to be bathed later, but that was a task he'd leave to a tech. For the time being, Grian administered her medicine, and while the puppy didn't exactly enjoy it, she'd gotten better about squirming quite so much.

"Did you hear there was a sighting of Ringmaster last night?" Mumbo's voice echoed through the room, just loud enough to be heard over the incessant barking of some of their more energetic patients. "It's all over the news right now."

Grian managed not to react, looking up at his friend, who was standing beside the kennel of a heavily-pregnant poodle named Butter. The dog in question had some issues with bleeding, and her panicking owners had dropped her off the night prior with the intention of returning once the babies were safely born. She was due any day now.

"Oh, really?" Grian finished up with his puppy and returned her to the kennel. While he was there, he grabbed her water bowl to be refilled.

“What was he doing?”

“I don’t think they quite know,” Mumbo hummed, stretching his hands over his head. “He was reported to be around the downtown area. Apparently, he did a number on a couple of cops.”

“Did he?”

Grian knew these things already, though he’d never admit such a thing to Mumbo. His coworker enjoyed telling him about things he assumed Grian didn’t know, though, so who was he to spoil the fun? The vet simply continued on with his busy work while Mumbo spoke.

“Yeah,” Mumbo said. “There were apparently, like, five guys on the scene. They spotted him, and initiated a fight without calling the heroes, which they’re supposed to do.”

“Ringmaster fought off five cops? At once?” Grian raised his brows in feigned surprise. Having seen the state of Ringmaster’s knuckles post-scuffle made the number of opponents fairly believable.

“Yeah! Sick, right?” Mumbo clicked his tongue and shook his head, a genuinely amazed expression on his face. “Anyways, apparently two of them are in the hospital for their injuries right now.”

Grian paused. Something new settled in his chest. A realization sat itself upon his shoulders, heavy and real and enough to make him feel an overwhelming pit of guilt form in his gut.

For all the time he’d spent with Ringmaster the previous night, for all the laughter they’d exchanged, and for all details that had been

divulged regarding his interactions, Grian had neglected to ask one simple question. He'd been completely caught up in the moment – too entertained by a mutual love of cats and the menial task of bandaging fresh wounds.

He turned to face Mumbo fully, biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself in check. Shaky and slightly scared of the answer, Grian inquired about that terribly important topic now, "Are those people… alright?"

Mumbo stopped to think about it, visibly trying to recall the specifics of the case. "Uh, I'm not sure," he said after a minute. "I'll check the report again. Hold on."

Grian waited in silence as his friend pulled something up on his phone. His brows scrunched and his eyes narrowed as he read it closer.

The entire time, Grian fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten to worry about the health of Ringmaster's opponents. Just because his fears had faded some, and he was toeing the line of legality himself didn't mean he was prepared for the full extent of what a criminal got up to on a nightly basis. How could he have adjusted enough to this twisted normalcy to the point that he forgot about the consequences of a villain's success altogether?

"Oh! A new press release interviewed one of the guys involved," Mumbo gasped excitedly. He trotted over to where Grian was still sitting on the ground and knelt. "Looks like everyone's alright. Just some broken bones."

Grian took the phone as it was offered to him and skimmed the visible article. His eyes caught on one particular passage:

Quotes from some of the victims, who all wish to remain anonymous, indicate an interesting dynamic held throughout the fight. “I only realized after the fact,” the man said, “[Ringmaster] didn’t use his power once while he was fending us off. We thought we really stood a chance, but the whole time, he was holding back. Really goes to show that those people are on another level.”

Similar answers were given by his colleagues. Is this inexplicable mercy an indication of the villain going soft, or is something bigger at play? Either way, encountering a single Bamboozler alone seems to always be an omen of bad luck to come. The Agency has advised all civilians to review their own individual plans in the event of an emergency situation, and report any suspicious behavior to the provided hotline.

“Isn’t that cool?” Mumbo took his phone back, eyes wide. “He fought off so many people at once, and he wasn’t even using his *powers.* Gosh, with skills like his, I bet they couldn’t even scratch him.”

“Yeah,” Grian whispered. He recalled the scent of iron and knuckles tinted purple from repetitive blows — all things that probably could’ve been avoided if a little bit more power had been added to those punches. “Yeah. Not a single scratch.”

A bit of relief filtered into him.

Ringmaster wasn’t a good person. Good people didn’t hospitalize opponents who were significantly weaker than themselves. But he wasn’t endlessly cruel either.

Grian had enough experience with the guy by that point to know that he seemed to regard murder as a last resort option. Even while standing face to face with a stubborn civilian as they refused to hand

over valuable evidence all those weeks ago, he'd hesitated for longer than less generous folks might dare.

And now, thanks to this incident, he knew his strange companion also hesitated to use his powers against those without them.

There was more nuance to the criminal than his original assessment might've been able to predict. Grian wondered, a bit selfishly, if maybe he'd be able to learn more about the secrets hidden within the minds of the city's villains. He wondered how far into dangerous territory their little arrangement would allow him to stray. He wondered how deep he would let himself go before it became too much.

Grian wondered, most especially, why he wasn't particularly scared of the new apathy building inside of his chest, why he'd begun to empathize with these human personifications of terror, or why he didn't really mind taking the side of moral depravity as much with each visit to his apartment.

And then, he forced himself to stop wondering. The door opened to the kennels, and Skizz stepped inside.

The briefest glance was all Grian needed to catch sight of what were perhaps the ugliest scrubs in the history of mankind adorning his coworkers frame. Whereas Mumbo and Grian valued the classic simplicity of regular scrubs, Skizz tended towards the eccentric. His outfit today was proof of this lifestyle.

The fabric was dotted with little floral patterns and big bursts of color, like he was a tourist on a tropical vacation rather than a veterinarian clocking in for his shift. The amount of clashing patterns vying for any onlookers' attention seemed only to grow stronger as Grian realized that Skizz's pants did not match his shirt.

They were, in fact, two entirely *different* floral patterns. Whereas his top half was just various splotches of brightness, his bottoms incorporated flower petals in the shapes of hearts.

Grian would be lying if he were to say Skizz made them work, because it was virtually impossible for any living creature to make that much of anything look decent, but it *was* typical. Neither he nor Mumbo really batted an eye.

“Hey, Mumbo, buddy,” Skizz started, gesturing behind him. “We got an impromptu owner come in asking if we can take a look at his cat. I’m supposed to help out with a surgery in a few minutes, so I can’t go.”

“Ah, really? Me?” Mumbo slumped, exhaustion from the day weighing him down. “Why can’t Grian do it?”

“Well, uh, you’re never going to believe it,” Skizz said, a confused smile brimming on his lips. “This dude actually requested I send him ‘anyone *but* Grian.’ Apparently he knows him or something and said it’d be weird.”

“What?” Both Grian and Mumbo perked up, sharing a look of mutual uncertainty.

Grian racked his mind for anyone who might possibly be visiting the clinic with a cat. He came up empty. Either way, with no room to debate, Mumbo slipped out and Skizz lingered by the kennels.

“So, G-sharp,” Skizz chuckled. “Which of your peeps are embarrassed by how cool you are?”

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it,” Grian muttered.

He moved onto surveying the next dog down the line. It was a French bulldog that was recovering after having to have his stomach pumped. From what his file detailed, he’d gotten into a pack of alcohol-filled chocolates and nearly died. Mumbo had been the one to handle that procedure.

Grian fetched the syringe and began to fill it while he asked Skizz, “What’d they look like?”

“Um, it was a guy probably about your age,” Skizz said. “Brown hair, and sunglasses even though it’s cloudy outside. Ring any bells?”

“That was the vaguest description ever,” Grian scoffed. He picked up the dog and gently squirted the contents of the syringe into his mouth. “Did he give you a name?”

“No, and he hadn’t finished filling out his paperwork when I came to get Mumbo,” Skizz sighed, checking his watch. “Well, it’s about time for me to actually do my job. See ya, bud!”

“Yeah, alright,” Grian called back, only slightly disappointed that he wouldn’t be learning any other identifying details until he could speak to his coworkers again. “Bye Skizz.”

“Oh, but he did give me the name of his cat,” Skizz added from the doorway. “Jellie.”

Grian nearly dropped the dog in his arms. He whipped around, but Skizz had already shut the door.

A cat named Jellie.

A man that didn't want to see him.

Grian quickly set aside the empty syringe and deposited the dog securely back into its kennel. Stumbling a bit, he sprinted from the room and into the lobby. A couple of techs gave him a weird look, but he ignored them. He was huffing for breath by the time his eyes landed on the other vet.

"Mumbo!"

Mumbo turned, dropping his used gloves into the wastebasket. He'd just left one of the exam rooms, and was notably *not* followed by any clients. Grian did a full circle in an attempt to see if there were people still around them. Instead, all he saw was an open space and several confused clinic staff.

"Hey, G," Mumbo said, frowning at him. "Did you need something?"

"That man," Grian panted. "I think I know him!"

"Uh, yeah," Mumbo replied. He raised one brow. "Is something the matter, Grian? You seem out of sorts."

"No, I'm fine." The vet forced himself to calm, not give away

everything so immediately. Mumbo would have questions if he acted too rashly, so he needed to bring it in quite a bit. “I was hoping to catch him before he left. I wanted to… check if it was the same guy I was imagining.”

“You’re out of luck there, man,” his friend said, tutting. “He was worried his cat might have a problem, since she was sneezing often and not eating as much. Thankfully, it just seems like she was just reacting to some of the pollen in the air lately and not a fan of her new meal plan. Nothing else was wrong with her, so the visit was over quickly.”

“And this owner,” Grian hummed. He leaned against the doorframe, doing his best to seem nonchalant. “What did he look like? Y’know, roughly?”

“Um, brown hair, a little shorter than I am, and an interesting collection of scars all over him,” Mumbo said. “Nice guy. Didn’t want to talk to me or linger for long, which was great because I did *not* remember his name at all. Kind of my ideal client.”

If he’d retained any doubts, they were cast aside with the last physical descriptor.

Grian tried desperately to keep from freaking out in front of the other vet, but his skull was caving in on itself.

Ringmaster had been in his clinic, undisguised, just down the hall from him. Somehow, despite knowing all three Bamboozlers had pets, he’d never even considered the possibility of one of them visiting him at work – especially not out of costume.

And yet, it had happened, and he’d missed it.

Ringmaster had walked in like a regular civilian, filled out paperwork like a regular civilian, gotten his beloved cat a check-up like a regular civilian, and then left. He'd escaped without so much as an ounce of indication towards his true identity, beyond what Grian knew.

Wait a second, a small voice in Grian's mind whispered. *He filled out a form.*

Ringmaster had willingly come into their office and put all of his classified, personal information onto a sheet that would remain in their database forever. Grian kind of wanted to throw up at that thought.

The vet's eyes landed firmly on the clipboard Mumbo held in his hands. Dangerous curiosity, beyond any he'd ever felt before, spiked in his chest. His hands clenched, but he forced his expression to remain as indifferent as possible. His skills were strained as every bone in his body itched to know what was written on that paper.

"Do you, uh, have his form? I can file it for you, if you want," Grian offered, suddenly dizzy. A cacophony of arguing voices swirled inside of his head, each with a different opinion on his actions. Some of them begged him to sneak a look, learn more despite the risk. He wasn't going to do that, though.

For as long as that paper continued to exist mere feet away from him, containing things that nagged at the worst part of his curiosities, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. Grian was going to hide it or shred it or spill coffee on it – anything to get rid of the damnation the ink on that page could bring him, even if it got him in trouble at work.

“Oh, yeah, sure. That’d be very helpful,” Mumbo said. He shifted the clipboard around to find the requested paperwork and frowned. “Odd. I could’ve sworn it was right here…”

Grian perked up. “What? Did you lose it?”

“Um,” Mumbo stammered, flipping through the assorted sheets in his arms. None of them, it seemed, were what he was looking for. “I know for a fact I brought it out of the exam room with me. It’s just… gone.”

A paper full of priceless information on one of the most wanted people in the city suddenly disappearing? Grian leaned further against the wall, knowing instantly what that meant. Poor, sweet Mumbo had been robbed blind.

It was a little comical, actually. His friend was blissfully unaware of the person he’d met moments ago. The weight of the situation would never sink in fully for him the way it did for Grian. Mumbo was one of countless of the city’s civilians that now walked through their daily life, clueless to the fact that they’d witnessed Ringmaster’s maskless face in real time.

Although, that sparked another direction of thought for him. Ringmaster’s maskless face as seen through specifically Mumbo’s eyes – now that was bound to be interesting.

“Forget the paperwork. We’ll find it later.” Grian straightened, crossing his arms in front of his chest and clearing his throat. “Mumbo… What did you think about that man just now? His looks, I mean?”

“Me?” Mumbo furrowed his brows and scrunched his nose. “Gosh, I’m not sure. Don’t get me wrong, G… Your friend was nice enough. He

just wasn't really my type, you know?"

Grian's eyes widened the slightest bit. "Oh? Not even a little bit?"

"No, I wouldn't say so," Mumbo reiterated. "Too cheerful and polite, but to each their own."

Cheerful and polite were not adjectives he'd expected to hear describing that man. The vet pursed his lips, amusement bubbling up and almost overshadowing the absurdity of the situation. "Right, because your type is Ringmaster, isn't it? You prefer them faceless and mean and bloody?"

"Grian!" Mumbo's jaw dropped. "I should have your head for bringing that up again at work. In fact, come here! Since you're so desperate for a distraction, I'm going to have you help the cat in exam room two give birth."

Grian's smile fell. Wordlessly, he slipped out of the room and began running down the hall to the back. Mumbo chased behind him, shouting his name. Eventually, the complications of the day blurred together for long enough that he almost forgot about the strange visit to his workplace.

Almost.

"Appreciate you for coming all the way out here again," Eclipse said, unwrapping her bandages so Grian could see the progress of her healing. "We think it's safe enough, but we wanted to make sure."

“Yeah, it’s not a problem,” Grian said. He gave the formerly-infected area a quick glance, not needing much more. “I say you’re good to go. It’s basically completely healed. Honestly, it doesn’t even need to be treated anymore.”

It was the truth. The old wound had pretty much disappeared, on track to barely even leave a scar behind. Eclipse would be safe to move around and whatnot without trouble from now onward. Hopefully, with the knowledge gained from this incident, none of the Bamboozlers would allow their injuries to get so horrifically infected again.

He made a point not to tell her that, in actuality, her problem area had been healed for about seven days already. During his last visit, a week prior, it was on the brink of being safe enough for a return to normalcy. However, for fear she would push herself too hard too fast, he lied and said he’d need to check it out again in the future. Overtreating the wound wasn’t even half as dangerous as immediate overexertion.

“Yes! Finally, we can go back to destroying the city,” Eclipse cheered. “Thanks, Grian! I’ll make sure to steal you something nice during the next heist.”

“I urge you not to, actually.”

She jumped off her bed, overjoyed by the news. He rolled his eyes, following her as she ran out into the bunker’s main room. The other two were waiting for them there. Ringmaster was reading a book at the kitchen table, and Jimmy was walking on the treadmill.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, Eclipse shouted, “I’m all better!”

To show off just how much better she was, the pink-haired villain paused and did a cartwheel without an ounce of warning. Grian sidestepped to avoid being kicked in the face, but he was too pleased to be bothered by the near miss.

“That’s great,” Ringmaster replied, setting down what he’d been reading to cross the room. “We can put our plan into motion soon, then?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Eclipse confirmed. “I’m so excited. I’ve been cooped up for weeks.”

“Hey, Grian?”

Grian turned to see Jimmy approaching him. He was in work-out clothes, a towel over his neck and beads of sweat dripping down his face. Even with this being the vet’s fourth visit to the Bam Bunker, seeing two out of three of the Bamboozlers in casual attire was never not weird. Ringmaster, as his designated escort, tended to remain in costume.

“Yes, Timmy?”

“Again with the wrong name,” Jimmy grumbled, but shook it off immediately. He shoved his phone in Grian’s face. There was a picture of a cat displayed on the screen. “Do you think Norman’s overweight?”

“Overweight?” Grian took the phone, staring down at the photo. He was surprised to be given the opportunity to do anything vaguely related to genuine vet work while with the villains. Usually, they just

needed him to do his best to apply those techniques to humans. This was much more his speed. “Can you show me a couple different photos?”

Jimmy agreed, flipping through his camera roll to reveal what he could without giving away his whole identity.

Norman was a fluffy little thing, with an adorable face and a shorter stature. According to his owner, he was a rescue from off the streets. Despite having such an innocent demeanor, he was apparently quite the terror when it came to food. Often, he would scarf his bowl down quite fast, and then try to steal from Jimmy’s other cat soon after.

“And he’s always begging for more,” Jimmy told him. “I know I shouldn’t, but sometimes I give in.”

“That’s alright every now and again,” Grian chuckled. “I do too. My little beasts are healthy, but very greedy.”

“It’s true,” Ringmaster chimed in from where he’d been chatting with Eclipse. “And they’re so cute.”

“Anyway,” Jimmy said, shooting Ringmaster a glare for reasons Grian didn’t understand. “Is Norman healthy, or should I be worried?”

“Hm, I mean,” Grian started. “He doesn’t look too bad from what I can tell. Pictures aren’t perfect, though, so let me write down a few diet food brands I recommend that might be able to help. Extra exercise also wouldn’t hurt — playing with him more, or getting him some toys that might encourage him to move around.”

Jimmy opened his notes app, and Grian wrote down whatever brands and instructions he could remember off the top of his head.

"Although, if it's his food intake and consistent insistence on being hungry that's got you concerned," Grian continued once that was done. "You should bring him to my clinic sometime. I'll check him for worms."

At the mention of the clinic, Grian shot a glance in Ringmaster's direction. The villain was conveniently not meeting his eyes at that point.

"Really? You'd do that for me?" Jimmy placed a hand over his heart, seeming touched. "For free?"

"For free?" Grian scrunched up his nose, a shiver of disgust traveling through him. "No. You'd be paying full price."

"What?" Jimmy frowned, and Eclipse snorted behind them. "But vet visits are so expensive, Grian! Don't you have a discount for friends?"

"Don't act like you don't have plenty of money," the vet retorted, crossing his arms. "Finish planning for your heist or whatever if it's really getting that dire for you."

"Oh my goodness," Ringmaster gasped, drawing the room's attention his way. "Grian, are you encouraging us to commit a crime? I never thought I'd see the day."

"You're going to do that whether I suggest it or not," Grian said. "I refuse to be duped out of payment while I'm on the clock just because

I know the people doing it."

"I asked you last time if we should compensate you for your work with us," Ringmaster pointed out. "And *you* didn't want us to. What's with this switch up?"

Grian ran a hand through his hair. "One of those things is my job, and the other is an endlessly weird hobby that I do with questionable accuracy. It feels wrong."

He didn't give them another chance to argue, pushing past all three and starting towards the kitchen area. Grian had been in the base enough to know where they kept their extra bags of chips, and he was not about to leave for the day without some non-monetary form of payment. He had just gotten a pack out of the cabinet above the sink when he noticed something.

On the table, there was a collection of sprawling maps, blueprints, as well as pictures taken from a street view of one particular building. It took a second for it to sink in, but Grian realized after a moment that he *recognized* this place.

The layout in the blueprint and the exterior of the building looked exactly like his old bank — the one he'd just switched his accounts out of less than two months ago.

Or, well, it *almost* looked exactly right. The blueprint was a little off with how it showed the interior to be formatted.

"Shoot!" He heard scrambling feet as Ringmaster sprinted over to stand in front of the obvious heist plans. "You weren't supposed to see this."

“Yeah, definitely not,” Grian hummed. Quietly, he mused to himself, “Glad I moved my money out of *there.”*

“Huh? What was that? Did you just say you had money in this bank?” Ringmaster frowned. “That’s not good.”

“No, don’t worry,” Grian reassured him, waving his hands. “I switched banks to the one on Fifth Street recently. I kept having complications with their customer service, so I took my business elsewhere.”

Ringmaster let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

“But I’m curious,” Grian started up again. He stepped forward, a little too close into Ringmaster’s personal space bubble, and then glanced over his shoulder. Though his main view was blocked, what he could make out definitely confirmed his suspicions. “How old is that blueprint you have?”

“How… old?” Ringmaster’s voice had gotten quieter. Grian backed off and nodded. “We got it from an archive that I can’t name, so it’s a couple of years old. Why do you ask?”

“Because it’s wrong,” Grian said. Jimmy and Eclipse looked over in their direction at that, curiosity piqued.

As the two approached, Eclipse asked, “What do you mean it’s wrong?”

“They had a fire inside about four months ago,” Grian told them,

dredging up what he could remember. “And they used the insurance money to do a major interior remodel.”

“What?” Jimmy said, brows raising. “But I’ve been inside while disguised. It looks exactly the same from what I saw, and there weren’t any talks about a remodel.”

“Yeah, but that’s only in the main lobby area. It’s back towards the offices — where they keep the safe — that’s mainly changed, and it wasn’t exactly advertised.”

Ringmaster frowned, and stepped aside. All four of them gathered around to look at the blueprints for the bank. Grian pointed to the safe, which was shown to be on the right hand side of the building’s staff-only section.

“This is over here now,” Grian said, dragging his finger along the paper to a section on the left. “And it’s been put a layer under the ground too. They realized there was termite damage in the roofing, so during their remodel, they moved it around to prevent someone taking advantage of it before it could be fixed.”

“Wow,” Eclipse gasped. “How did you find out so much about this? We’ve scoured the internet, and none of our sources knew that.”

“They kept it pretty quiet. I was a longtime patron, so when I went to talk to my accountant at the time, he told me things they wouldn’t normally admit,” Grian replied. “He had a lot of complaints about how the fresh paint smell was giving him headaches and the new alarm system was really buggy, and kept tripping every time he opened in the mornings.”

“A buggy alarm system, termite damage, and the safe being moved?”

Ringmaster brought a hand up to his mask, tapping on the metal in deliberation. “Interesting. This changes quite a few things.”

Grian shrugged, opening his bag of chips and beginning to snack. Beyond telling them what he knew, the vet wasn’t really curious about the rest of their plan. Plausible deniability and whatnot — if they didn’t tell him, he wasn’t guilty for not reporting it.

Plus, he was still quite peeved at how many missed phone calls and annoying customer service representatives he’d been forced to deal with when he was trying to inquire about a loan months prior. The lengths to which they would go to make the process of even considering moving out impossible was so stupid.

Everything was much simpler at his new bank, though he wasn’t actually planning on leaving his apartment anymore. He was content with the space, and he had his neighbors to feed his cats. While being a homeowner would be nice, it was something to consider when he had genuine reason for a larger space. Otherwise, it was needless debt and needless trouble.

“Well, as fun as this has been,” Grian started. “I need to go to work soon, so I should get home and change into my scrubs. If someone could please escort me out, that would be lovely.”

Ringmaster jumped to it, nodding and grabbing the usual blindfold that they kept by the exit. Grian bid the other two farewell, covered his eyes, and took hold of Ringmaster’s outstretched arm. Gently, so as not to startle him or force him to bump into any walls, he was led into an elevator. No classical music played in this one, but he did get to hear his companion’s soft humming as they ascended.

“Thanks for your help, G,” Ringmaster spoke, breaking through the silence as the doors dinged to indicate their opening. Gravel crunched

beneath their feet as they walked. Grian theorized they were at some kind of work site because of it. “I know I say it all the time, but you really have saved us so often. Eclipse is better now, and we know more for our mission.”

“The second part of that was pure coincidence,” Grian said. He bumped his shoulder against the villain’s as they walked, arms interlocked. “Don’t expect me to help with your evil scheming all the time.”

“No, no. Trust me, even if you never helped us with anything ever again, I’m beyond happy with what you *have* done,” Ringmaster laughed. It was a nice sound. “And the other two definitely feel the same way.”

The vet heard the jingling of keys, and then the clicking of a car unlocking. It meant they would be driving for the next several minutes before it was deemed safe for him to be able to see again. As he had to do every time he’d visited, Grian got into the passenger seat of an unknown car with a dangerous criminal, and engaged in idle chatter.

Ringmaster was the first to suggest the afternoon’s topic of conversation. “You have any fun customers recently at work?”

“Besides you? Sure. I told you about the lady who brought in a tropical fish she’d found while on vacation, right?” Ringmaster made a noise to indicate he hadn’t, and Grian tutted, “She couldn’t figure out why the poor thing was so weak. Didn’t even consider that removing it from its home and bringing it back on a plane would nearly kill it.”

“Wow,” Ringmaster whistled. “People are dumb.”

“Yeah, truly,” Grian grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. “And

then, there was this other guy who came in and asked us to take a look at *him,* because he'd accidentally eaten one of his dog's treats."

"Wait, what?" Ringmaster made a baffled sound. Grian felt the car turn and speed up a little as they obviously got onto a bigger road. "How does someone accidentally eat a dog treat?"

"It's kinda common, actually. Not for people to come in asking to be helped, but eating treats definitely is." Grian tapped his finger against his arm, smiling. "There's this pastry shop down the road that makes dog safe-versions of regular human foods. His wife had bought a pack of treats that looked like cookies without telling him."

"So what happened to him?"

"Nothing," the vet chuckled. "They're not toxic to humans. They just taste kinda bad."

"Oh. Lame," Ringmaster sighed, tone almost disappointed. Then, Grian heard him draw in a breath, excitement becoming palpable in the air around them. "Although, those would make a really funny prank, wouldn't they?"

Grian raised a brow, his smile growing sharper. "You're not wrong. Someone who isn't expecting it would get quite the shock."

"Grian," Ringmaster started. "Next time you come over, is there any chance you could bring us a gift of some not-at-all nefarious cookies?"

"I think that could absolutely be arranged," Grian laughed. "Might be hard, because I rarely get warnings for things like this, but I'll try to

keep a pack on me."

The car came to a stop, and the engine turned off. Grian assumed it was safe to remove his blindfold, blinking a few times to let his eyes adjust to the light. Ringmaster had parked them on an empty side street a couple of blocks from the vet's apartment. It was their usual drop-off spot to avoid arousing any suspicion.

"Well, that's an easy fix," Ringmaster told him. He leaned across the center console, laughter lines crinkling in that brilliantly familiar way. "Give me your phone number."

"What?" Grian's mouth opened and closed a couple of times. His face warmed despite itself. "You want my phone number?"

"Yeah," Ringmaster said. "I'll call you in advance next time I *conveniently* know my old injuries are flaring up."

"Ah," Grian replied eloquently. His chest squeezed. "Isn't that a… safety risk?"

"I mean, not really," Ringmaster said, snorting. "Unless, of course, you somehow know how to trace phone calls?"

"I don't."

"Then, it's not," the villain concluded. "I trust you not to take it to the police."

Grian's mind hung on one part of that statement. "You… trust me?"

Ringmaster gave him a funny look, tilting his head. "Um, obviously? You would've done something by now if that was your goal. I doubt you're going for the long con here."

"Right," Grian said, a little too awestruck. "Yeah, okay."

His heart slammed against his ribcage and forced him into the present again. He reached down to fish out his phone. The vet passed it to Ringmaster with it opened on a new contact. The villain happily tapped away, and then handed it back.

"I've already sent myself a text from your phone, so I have your contact info too," Ringmaster hummed. "Now, scram, dude! You'll run out of time to get ready for work if you keep waiting around."

"Oh, um, right, yes," Grian said. He grabbed his bag, thanked the other man for the ride, and got out. Ringmaster waited until he was around the corner to start up the engine and leave again.

As the vet made his way back to his apartment, he gazed down at the new contact in his phone — the new bridge that had been formed between him and his most unlikely friend — as well as the singular text message that Ringmaster had sent himself.

The contact name was stupid. It read, *'Your Favorite Guy,'* and had a little ring emoji next to it. He'd texted himself a singular winky face, and the thought of it being the villain's one mark left in his phone had his stomach turning in knots.

It was childish, meant nothing in the grand scheme of things, but for the time being, he let it keep him company as he made his way home. The world felt ever so slightly brighter.

Since Eclipse's revitalization, sightings of the Bamboozlers had been skyrocketing.

Every day of the week, for two weeks straight, the three had been spotted or suggested to be in a completely different area within the city. What exactly they were doing ranged from general thievery to various forms of vandalism. The streak of criminal activity was entirely unpredictable, sending the city's reporters and law enforcement on constant wild goose chases.

From what Grian was allowed to know, the Bamboozlers had postponed their original plan of robbing a bank until they had regained their bearings of the situation. It seemed their *new* tactic was to wreak as much havoc with as little of a pattern as possible — a big release of *a lot* of pent up energy.

Not all of their escapades resulted in an altercation with the police or the heroes, of course, but a few of them definitely had. While the villainous trio tried their best to slip away as often as possible before it reached that point, those options weren't always on the table.

As such, the amount of injuries sustained had *also* skyrocketed.

For five nights in a row, he'd been bugged by one or all of the Bamboozlers.

On the first, Grian had come back from work at around ten in the evening, and immediately set about wrapping a swollen ankle. Thankfully, Ringmaster hadn't broken it. Worst case scenario, it was twisted and then repeatedly irritated by moving around. An ice pack and a bit of rest was the most that could be done for that particular injury.

Ringmaster had stuck around to chat with him for a minute, but ultimately needed to go catch up with his team. A little while later, Grian received a text message simply reading, *Thanks, Doctor! You're the best!*

He'd only responded to remind the other man to keep off his ankle as much as possible, then Grian had gone to bed.

The next evening, while at work until midnight, he was able to see the security camera footage of the Bamboozler break-in for that evening as it aired on the news. They were robbing a large mall located on the outskirts of the downtown area, where only designer shops were able to afford spaces.

Pleasantly, Grian noticed how every shot of Ringmaster showed him leaning to the left a bit, subtly keeping most of his body weight on his other foot.

There wasn't a fight that evening, but he saw Ringmaster anyway. The villain was playing with Maui on his couch as Grian finally dragged himself through the door. When he presented his injury to the vet, however, it was with an understandably hesitant air.

"This is stupid," Grian told Ringmaster. "Of all the reasons to come to me, you must understand that this is the stupidest."

“I slammed it really hard in the door to a safe,” the villain said, pinky extended outwards. “I just want to make sure it’s not broken. That’s not stupid!”

Grian grumbled a couple of expletives and took Ringmaster's hand.

He wasn’t terribly gentle as he felt along his bones, squeezing and bending each joint as he went. The other’s palm was littered with calluses and faded scars, proof of his line of work, though nothing out of place yet. Grian got to the specific finger in question, noting how the villain flinched when bending it. Still didn’t feel terrible though. He pursed his lips in contemplation.

“Probably just bruised.” The vet dropped Ringmaster’s hand, eager to do so before his mind decided to wonder how it might feel to lace their fingers together. “You’d know if it was truly broken. I’m pretty sure there’d be severe swelling and pain.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ringmaster said. “Just wanted to check since my pain tolerance is much higher than your average person. I didn’t want to be so awesome that it inhibited me.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about on that front, buddy,” Grian retorted. He patted the villain on the shoulder, and relished in the offended scoff he got in return. “There’s no treatment for a bruise, so you’re going to have to deal with this minor inconvenience.”

He tried to walk into the kitchen, maybe to make the two of them a snack or something, but Ringmaster cut him off by jamming his hand back in the vet’s face. “I do know *one* thing that could help me.”

“Oh yeah?” Grian raised an unimpressed brow. “What’s that?”

Ringmaster leaned closer, wiggling his fingers. “Won’t you kiss it better for me, Doctor?”

Grian paused. It took several seconds, but the ask finally set in, and he flushed. Caught completely off guard, he stammered, “Absolutely not! You are a grown man!”

“But Grian,” the villain whined. He dipped forward, and before Grian could stop him, plopped his forehead down on the vet’s shoulder. “It hurts! You’re supposed to make me feel better.”

“Not like this, though!”

Grian swallowed around a new, damning lump in his throat. Ringmaster let out another groan of irritation, obviously not planning on dropping this at any point. He held up his hand again in front of Grian’s face, silently pleading. They were going to be stuck there all night if one of them didn’t give.

“Fine,” Grian sighed. “If it’ll make you shut up.”

He took Ringmaster’s hand, and gave the quickest peck to his pinky as he could manage. Then, he shoved the villain off him. There were crinkled eyes waiting for him as soon as Ringmaster straightened up, far too smug to have gotten what he wanted. Grian felt like he’d indulged a pet when he wasn’t supposed to – like he’d given a treat to a dog and accidentally rewarded his begging.

“Oh, I got you something,” Ringmaster remembered, snapping his fingers. “Come, come!”

He ran into the kitchen, letting Grian follow behind him. With a huge, sweeping gesture, he directed the room's attention to a box on the counter. Grian eyed him skeptically, but eventually went over and opened it.

Within the box was a singular silver timepiece.

"A watch?"

It was interesting. Not the kind of thing Grian had expected. A stupid knick-knack, or a boxed up prank waiting to take him by surprise would be better suited to the usual interactions he would have with this man. This, however, looked closer to a genuine gift.

The watch itself was impressively reserved, picked out by a keen observer. Nothing about it screamed a high value, or indicated any wearers' gaudy attitude, but it was very clearly crafted with care. The timepiece ticked rhythmically over and over, a soft green tint to the hands and dashes to suggest its face might be the type to glow in the dark, which added practicality to the mix.

Grian removed it from the box, and let his thumb trace around the silver edge. He could feel Ringmaster's gaze on him from where the man had leaned himself up against the counter. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," he answered honestly.

It wasn't much of a question, even. This was like something he would've picked out for himself. The design suited him perfectly, and would work for both casual and business attire. It was classy, and he appreciated everything about it. He glanced up at Ringmaster,

something foreign and beyond normal appreciation filtering into his gut.

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” Ringmaster said. “I saw it, and just knew I had to get it for you.”

Grian smiled, thumb tracing the clock face again. “You really did a great job. I’m impressed—“

He stopped dead. A sharp reminder clicked together in his head, and he narrowed his eyes.

“You didn’t just steal this, did you?”

Ringmaster tensed, eyes going wide. Grian sucked in a breath.

“You *did!”* He put the watch into the box again and shoved it in the villain’s direction. “Take it back! I don’t want to be involved in your crimes!”

“Oh, man, would you look at the time?” Ringmaster glanced down at his wrist, though it wasn’t the one on which he was actually wearing a watch. “I’ve gotta be on my way. Enjoy the gift! Bye, Grian!”

“What? No! You can’t just—!”

Grian wasn't able to grab him in time. Ringmaster was sprinting into his living room and diving out one of his windows at record speed. His stolen watch, probably worth hundreds of dollars given the fancy mall they'd just robbed, was left behind. Grian grumbled about his rotten luck, but put the watch with the rest of his accessories for safe keeping anyway.

The third night in a row that Grian had villains in his home, he'd been out at dinner with Mumbo and came back to find all three Bamboozlers sitting around his kitchen table. They told him that the vandalism they'd committed that evening wasn't on the news yet, but they'd gotten into a scuffle with some security guards, and were really just there to leech off his supply of bandages.

Since the three of them were determined to seek him out for any minor scrape or bruise they gained, he opted to host a quick class on the proper way to clean one's wounds. Grian made them each apply their own little bottle of solution and bandage their own minor injuries. Then, he wrote down a list of every store in town that sold said products, as well as his suggestions for setting up the perfect homemade first-aid kit.

It wasn't exactly the hospitality they'd been expecting, though, so he eased the ache by making them hot chocolate. He left the room while they sipped, packing away his supplies and feeding his cats. By the time he'd returned, Ringmaster was lingering by an open window, waving goodbye. He slipped out before Grian could respond, leaving the apartment empty and quiet far too quickly.

The fourth day in a row he'd seen the villains didn't technically take place in his home. He'd gotten back from work at around five in the evening, and at five thirty, Ringmaster shot him a text.

Meet me on the street where I usually drop you off? My old injuries are flaring up, it read, with a little winky face emoji sent in rapid succession.

Grian replied with a thumbs up, grabbing a box of completely unassuming cookies on his way out the door. Ringmaster's car — a nondescript black SUV — was waiting where it always was. He hopped in, blindfolded himself, and they spent the entirety of the drive giggling.

"I brought cookies," Grian called as he slipped off his blindfold. Jimmy and Eclipse practically tripped over themselves to get to him first. Grian passed the box their way, not needing much more introduction. He trusted they wouldn't read the labels very well.

The closest the two schemers got to being caught was when Eclipse raised her eyes to Ringmaster, and asked, "Don't you want any?"

"I had some in the car," was Ringmaster's response.

Their victims didn't even stop to question the validity of that statement, despite clearly no cookies missing from the box when they opened it. Ringmaster and Grian got to sit back and watch as masks were lifted just enough to allow little cookies to fit through. Bites were taken. Instantly, the other two changed their countenance, eyes growing wide.

Eclipse snatched the box out of Jimmy's hands to read the label. She gasped, then took off towards the trash can to spit it out. Jimmy had the unfortunate luck of having swallowed his cookie completely when Eclipse shouted, "Dog treats? You gave us *dog treats?"*

After seeing Jimmy's mounting expression of horror, it was impossible not to burst out laughing. Grian and Ringmaster doubled over, tears in their eyes, and bodies bumping into each other in an attempt not to fall over. Both of them shrieked as the box of cookies was thrown full-

force at them.

“Oh, I am going to *kill* you losers,” Eclipse declared, a growl to her voice that suggested it wasn’t entirely a joke. Grian nudged his companion, pointing as she started to approach them. Thankfully, Ringmaster seemed to notice how dire their situation had become.

“Run, Grian!” Ringmaster grabbed his hand, and together, the two of them sprinted down the side hallway. The villain yanked them into the first door on the right, and they both pushed their whole body weight against the wood. Eclipse and Jimmy began pounding at it, cursing them frantically.

They cackled, holding them off for several minutes. Eventually, the other two gave up. Their revenge would be sure to come soon enough, most likely, but things had calmed for the time being. Grian focused on regaining his lost breath, cheeks burning from holding a smile for too long. To help get his mind settled, he got his first good look at his new surroundings.

It seemed like he’d been pulled into another one of the Bamboozlers’ bedrooms. It was a similar size to Eclipse’s own, but it wasn’t an overwhelming pink display. Instead, it was actually exceedingly tasteful. Grian found his eyes latching onto the earthy tones of the decor, the use of bamboo as decorative pieces, and the soft lighting that radiated from the space.

“Wow,” Grian marveled. “Someone is quite the decorator.”

“Thank you!”

Grian looked over at Ringmaster, confused.

“This is my room,” Ringmaster clarified for him, clearly beaming beneath his mask. “And interior design is what I studied in school. Y’know, before all the villainy.”

“Wait, really?” Grian’s jaw dropped ever so slightly. He took another glance around the room, amazed. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“Well, you’ve seen Eclipse’s room. If this wasn’t me, it was Jimmy,” Ringmaster started. “Which, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, he’s not very detail-oriented a lot of the time. He’s got his hobbies that he’s good at, but decorating is not one of them.”

Grian considered it for a moment, but concluded that he was probably right.

“Well, we’re going to have to wait them out.” Ringmaster stepped past him and sat himself on the edge of the bed, patting the space beside him. “Here, sit. If we leave too soon, they’ll just jump us immediately.”

The vet joined without much fuss, pleased to find the bed to be very comfortable. The blankets were plush, and the mattress itself was obviously memory foam. After a week of non-stop working, most of his shifts being late-night, Grian really wished he could just fall into the softness and sleep forever.

He didn’t, though, because a question came to him. “Hey, why don’t you just stop the other two with your powers? I’ve seen clips of you interrupting heroes as they’re running before. Can’t you do that now?”

“Use my powers?” Ringmaster raised a brow. “Oh, no. That’s a bad

idea for so many reasons."

"Why? Are there, like, drawbacks to it that I don't know about?"

"Well, not really, aside from the fact that I can't focus my powers on more than one thing at a time, that definitely makes it difficult," the villain told him. Grian kicked off his shoes and pulled a knee up to his chest, letting his chin rest atop it. "There's also the fact that they're my teammates."

"I mean, obviously," the vet said, smiling. "What? Do you have some sort of pact against using your powers on each other?"

"Grian, if I use my powers on either of them, it gives *them* silent permission to use their powers on *me,"* Ringmaster spelled out slowly. "I know I look cool on television, but going up against people who can cast blindness and turn invisible? That's a death wish, especially in a prank war."

Grian frowned. "What? I mean, yeah, that *kinda* makes sense. Still, I thought your power was, like, allegedly one of the best out of every villain in the city?"

"My power? It can be, I guess," Ringmaster said. "Those opinions are only speculation. The public doesn't know what I can do."

"Alright," Grian said, toeing the line more than usual. He felt like it was safe enough, like they were past the point in their relationship where curiosity alone came with consequences. If he wasn't supposed to know something, the other would just not respond. "What *can* you do, then?"

He saw the villain pause, visibly contemplating whether or not to answer. Slowly, he raised a hand and twirled his finger in a clockwise motion.

A red glow appeared around it, much like the one Grian had seen during their first meeting in the darkened alleyway. It remained equally as impressive, if not more, to see something as rare as a superpower from such a close distance.

“Well, most media says it’s matter manipulation, and they’re not entirely wrong,” Ringmaster started. “It’s adjacent.”

A thrill ran up Grian’s spine as he realized he was finally going to *know more* about Ringmaster. It meant the man hadn’t been lying when he said he trusted Grian the other day. Any proof of their bond growing stronger — changing from tentative ally into almost friendly territory — was treasured deeply.

“My power is something I like to call Velocity.”

Grian echoed it quietly, awestruck, “Velocity?”

“Yes,” Ringmaster confirmed. “It allows me to control the speed at which one object moves for as long as I can hold my focus.”

To demonstrate, Ringmaster gestured to his finger. The red glow intensified, and the speed at which it turned in its clockwise motion grew ever faster. With the fading of the light, it slowed, until it seemed to barely be moving at all.

“Woah,” Grian whispered. “That’s cool. How do you use it in fights?”

The vet recalled immediately the evening in his kitchen. Attempting to stab his opponent with a stirring spoon had been unsuccessful because of this same red glow. It felt like being trapped in gelatine, like the forward momentum of his arm had been hijacked completely. He imagined that it was endlessly useful in encounters with heroes.

"It can be hard to make myself focus on my enemies for long periods of time, so I tend to just manipulate my own limbs," the other man said. "I'll speed up my punches mid-swing, so they hit twice as hard and send my enemies flying. Same with my kicks."

Grian recalled the one fight he'd witnessed in person, where Ringmaster had seemed to stop himself in the middle of the air. He mentioned it to the villain, who gave him a quick shrug.

"I just slowed down my body's descent time by a lot," Ringmaster answered. "I try to do that when I can to lessen the damage sustained when I have to fall from huge heights. It's not always pretty if my teammates aren't around to help me ease to the ground, but it's useful."

"That is cool," Grian hummed. Without thinking, he took Ringmaster's hand and brought it closer to him. He'd intended to just get a better look, but the light sputtered and failed nearly as soon as he'd gotten ahold of the man's wrist. "Shoot. Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, um, no. I just lost focus," came the villain's voice, cracking around the edges. Grian glanced over in time to see his eyes dart away, the visible parts of his face turning pink. "Sorry."

The vet wondered for a moment about his companion's state. Then, he remembered himself. Grian dropped his hand, embarrassment running

hot through his veins. No wonder Ringmaster was acting awkward when he'd just invaded his personal space without asking. Grian would've felt the same way.

Tense silence filtered through the room. Neither of them moved, or made eye contact. Both stewed in their heated cheeks and bothersome inner monologues for several minutes.

Finally, Grian grew sick of it. He sighed, "I think your power is very cool. Probably even cooler than invisibility and blindness."

Ringmaster huffed — a small, amused sound. "Well, if you said it, Doctor, then it must be true."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late."

They shared a mutual, secretive smile, even though it was interrupted by the barrier of a mask.

Shortly after, Grian was escorted out. The sun had almost completely set along the horizon by the time he was waving his goodbyes to Ringmaster at the drop-off point. Grian made it home with a sense of accomplishment lodged in the space between his ribs. He rode that high for the next several hours.

By the time the fifth evening had rolled around, a lot had changed.

Grian came home at two in the morning, feet throbbing in pain and head pounding against his skull. What was supposed to be an eight hour shift had very rapidly become fifteen straight hours after Skizz called in sick. He'd apparently come down with the flu last minute, so it was up to Mumbo, Grian, and a handful of the other clinic staff to pick up the slack.

It was painful, probably one of the worst days for the clinic in a very long time.

There were phone calls to be answered, files to be sorted, patients to fix up, owners to converse with, all coming through in a steady, evenly-spaced flow. And worst of all, their kennels in the back were almost at capacity. By the time Grian finished doing routine checks on every animal within their care, it was pretty much time to loop around and do it again.

The entire shift's tasks were deceptive, the kind of things that didn't *feel* busy as they were happening, until he took a moment to look back and realize that he hadn't been able to sit down once in the past eight hours.

As soon as Grian got home, he intended to sleep until the sun died.

Luck was not on his side.

It wasn't Ringmaster's fault that his presence only added to the vet's stress. It wasn't his fault that Grian walked through the door and actively deflated. It wasn't his fault, because Ringmaster had never seen him after a shift like this. The villain didn't recognize the signs of fatigue in Grian's posture, face, demeanor, and therefore, could not have predicted how his problems might contribute to a greater list.

“Grian,” the villain exclaimed far too loudly upon seeing him enter. “Welcome home!”

Grian sighed, slumping as he realized he couldn’t immediately fall into bed. His bag weighed heavily on his shoulder, like it was made up of rocks rather than a couple of medical tools. Ringmaster stared at him with a level of energy that was far above what any normal person should have at two in the morning.

The vet grunted out a quick, “What is it?”

It was at this point that Ringmaster started to notice something was wrong. His laughter lines lessened, eyes widening. The villain tipped his head to the side, dragging his gaze up and down Grian’s form, as if trying to diagnose an exact issue. Unfortunately, the vet wasn’t in the mood to waste time today.

“What’s wrong, dude?” He gritted it out with perhaps too much force.

“Oh, um… My arm.” Ringmaster blinked. “But, y’know, it doesn’t feel as important anymore so I’m going to—“

“Sit down,” Grian spat.

Ringmaster scrambled to seat himself on the couch.

The vet approached, dropping his bag and checking out the injury. It was hard to see through the torn fabric, but he could smell iron. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Ringmaster did as he was told, and Grian got a good look at what was probably the result of a near-miss with a knife. It was shallow, like the enemy had jabbed out faster than expected, but the target had still been able to duck out of the way.

After so long of treating villain's injuries, he was mildly impressed with his newfound ability to pick out the type of weapons that might've caused certain wounds. It was a similar kind of watered-down pride that occurred when he'd first started working with animals, and he could decipher what kind of pets his coworkers had been treating by the types of scratches they sustained.

The injury itself was located on the back of the arm, which Grian suspected would be the reason he was sought out. Anywhere further forward, and the villain would have treated himself no problem. He likely didn't know and couldn't see the extent of the scrape.

Under his breath, though, Grian still grumbled, "Where were your teammates? Couldn't they have taken care of this?"

Ringmaster was silent. When Grian looked over, his brows had furrowed, and a tint had come over his gaze. It wasn't amused or surprised or anything of that sort. Rather, the villain looked immensely ashamed. His countenance had changed too, shrinking in on himself the longer Grian stared.

The vet sighed, and gathered up the necessary materials for cleaning and bandaging. The actual process didn't take long at all. Ringmaster's wound would heal fairly quickly, given its shallow nature. Grian wasn't worried. As he finished, he set down the cleaning solution and wrappings, and fell beside Ringmaster on the couch.

The villain hadn't looked at him for several minutes. Uneasy silence permeated the air between them, thick and uncomfortable. Grian let

his head lull back, his eyes drifting shut. Everything within him ached, and now, the world around him was equally as upsetting. He hadn't meant to snap at his companion — his friend. It wasn't nice, wasn't right, even if it was definitely a little justified.

"I'm sorry," Grian said, his tongue leaden within his mouth. His lips struggled to form proper words, desperate to give in to silence already. Sleep was ridiculously close to claiming him, but he fought it back. He heard Ringmaster turn to face him. "I've just had a hard day. Shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"No," came Ringmaster's voice, smaller than it really needed to be. "No, Grian, not at all. Don't apologize. You shouldn't have to deal with me coming to you for every minor inconvenience."

Grian hummed, "It's fine. I won't complain."

Pleasant memories played along the inside of his eyelids, drifting him further from reality. He saw every single time the other man had come to him for help, and every time he'd come to him just for the sake of it.

Grian hadn't minded before — never really held a grudge against his villains for relying on him too much. He might joke about it, might encourage them to learn to do their own first-aid as much as possible, but it was for their benefit more than his own.

Grian liked his job, liked the company, liked the disruption to his regular routine. Today was the exception, only because he was tired.

Even then, he didn't dislike the comfortable presence beside him, or the gentle knowledge that if he spoke, he would be heard. He enjoyed the room's silence being broken by two sets of breathing, two separate

heartbeats, two minds spinning faster than mouths physically could.

It felt nice, suitable, safe. Grian was alright with giving up some of his control in favor of dipping his toes into the oncoming wave of sleep. He knew very well that he could be dragged under, but no part of him feared what might happen if he did.

He didn't fear much nowadays.

"I'm sorry for stressing you out so often," he distantly heard Ringmaster say. Vaguely, for Grian was too deep into the sands of unconsciousness, he thought he felt a hand brushing over his face, ghosting along his jaw. It was too soft to really be sure it was ever truly there. "Goodnight, Doctor. I'll let you rest for a while."

There was nothing beyond that.

The vet woke up the next morning in his bed, only the faintest recollection of the evening prior. There was breakfast waiting for him in the fridge, but no note had been left to indicate who made it, and no texts had been delivered in over a day.

Grian pushed through the bad feeling in his gut, and got on with his morning routine.

Chapter End Notes

> First of all, thank you for 25k hits. You're all insane and I love you.
>
> Second of all, the announcement I mentioned in the opening notes! After repeatedly being asked, I've gone ahead and made a discord server! You should be able to join here! You'll be able to get notifications whenever I post, and chat with me more directly!

As always, infinite amounts of love towards my beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! See you next Tuesday!!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jumping to conclusions was not a healthy way to move through life. Grian knew that. He didn't *want* to find patterns in the littlest things that might suggest something was wrong. In an ideal world, nothing would be wrong at all, this would be his imagination, and whatever perceived signs he'd been picking up on would only be in his head.

But he wasn't in an ideal world, and it was hard to just ignore the fact that he hadn't been called upon in a week since his last conversation with Ringmaster.

Now, admittedly, it'd taken him a bit to notice the absence.

For three days straight in which the Bamboozlers got up to no good on live television, none of them had seemed to sustain any injuries. They were running the heroes around in circles, throwing them for a loop and avoiding fights by escaping before their true intentions could be figured out. Therefore, it made sense for there to be radio silence.

On the fourth day, though, Grian watched Furioso land a fairly decently-sized slash along the whole of Ringmaster's back. The injury was bad enough that he'd fallen into Jimmy's arms, and Eclipse had tackled Furioso to the ground to distract him long enough for her teammates to get away.

From what the camera angle showed, it didn't *look* deep, but it was most definitely painful. The vet rewatched the clip several times to try and figure out if he would need to do stitches when the villains arrived at his place, ultimately opting to get out the necessary equipment anyway.

The only problem was that they never showed.

Grian hadn't missed them – hadn't stepped foot out of his apartment once in anticipation of their arrival, actually. They just hadn't come.

At first, the most he could really feel towards the situation was confusion. Grian sat on his couch in dead silence, completely and utterly confused. He should've had a job to do, should've had people to occupy him, should've had other bodies to take up space around him. But he didn't, and it left him in a strange limbo.

Disappointment came after the fact, when it finally *did* occur to him that something was off.

The Bamboozlers were genuinely capable human beings. They weren't bad at first aid, especially now that Grian had given them a more proper crash course, and could handle most situations on their own. They could clean, bandage, and care for things like cuts and bruises easily.

However, since Eclipse's collapse several weeks prior, the three had never been known to overestimate their skills. At the slightest suggestion of a bad injury, they were at his doorstep. Some would even say they abused their access to proper medical attention from time to time.

And yet, after an intense battle where a significant injury was sustained, Grian didn't receive so much as a text.

In fact, it shocked him so thoroughly that he found himself scouring the internet for any reports saying the three had been captured. He

couldn't believe that they might choose to just go home. It wasn't like them at all.

So, as was the natural next step, Grian began to worry that something was wrong.

They hadn't been caught, as his search had revealed, but something was keeping them from coming to him. A variety of options flooded his head, though the most prominent and jarring of them was simply a recollection of his last conversation with Ringmaster.

Grian was touchy that night, and more than a little rude towards his sort-of-friend. Still, he couldn't recall a single second where he implied he wanted out of their arrangement. Quite the opposite, actually.

Although, it'd been several days since that interaction, and he'd been *so* tired. There was no telling if his memory was trustworthy, or if the things he thought he'd said had ever left his lips. Maybe he hadn't apologized like he blearily remembered doing. Maybe his tone had been far more severe than he originally thought it to be. Maybe he'd snapped one too many times, alluded towards feelings he didn't really have, or muttered something on the brink of sleep.

Grian grabbed his phone, opening up Ringmaster's contact and drafting a new text. He paused as soon as it was done, hesitating over the send button.

How sure was he that this whole situation was his fault? How sure was he that this was the correct way to resolve the solution? How sure was he that they were avoiding him at all?

A misunderstanding was not the *only* potential cause for a change in

behavior. At the end of the day, there were an endless amount of things that might've happened.

Maybe the injury was better in person than it looked on television. Maybe they were closer to their base than Grian's apartment. Maybe someone's mask had malfunctioned, and swinging by would reveal their identity. There were so many possible reasons for why this could've been happening.

Grian forced himself to take a deep breath and reevaluate. He was supposed to be a rational thinker, someone that could use logic to get through the worst of situations. Breaking down his problems into little portions was what he'd always done during moments of overthinking.

It wouldn't make sense for the Bamboozlers to jeopardize their own health just to avoid him, when they'd previously never cared about disrupting his rhythm. If they needed to see him, they had no qualms tracking him down at work, or stalking him to his apartment. It wasn't the most personal or healthy of dynamics, but it worked for the four of them.

This whole problem was in his head. The radio silence was in his head. There was no need for anxiety, because they'd never once had a relationship that indicated Grian was owed any explanations for their behavior. They were thieves, criminals, villains, and only occasionally something like friends to him. It didn't matter that he'd thought they were progressing. What they had was strictly business.

Strictly business, even when Ringmaster made him breakfast after staying for too long into the night. Strictly business, even when Ringmaster invited him over just to pull a prank and hang out. Strictly business, even when Ringmaster said he trusted him not a week prior.

Strictly business, because all of that had stopped without an ounce of

warning.

And there he was, jumping to conclusions again. His mind repeated on loop that he'd done something wrong, driven them away somehow, and they were avoiding him. Grian tried to get his rational line of thinking back, but it was out of reach.

He deleted the text before he could be impulsive, and made himself go to bed.

The next morning, though, Grian was opening the villain's contact again, fuming with rage. It wasn't for the same reason as the night prior. This anger was much less confusing, much more poignant, and had a very clear target.

"Ringmaster, you idiot," Grian hissed as he typed a furious message. "I cannot *believe* you."

He had rolled out of bed that morning feeling cruddy, but a little less disturbed about the whole ordeal. It was too early to tell if he was being avoided, too early to beat himself up over nothing, and really, why should he worry anyway?

If they were going to develop into friends, that would happen naturally, and if it didn't, then it didn't. His problems were only cropping up due to his own tendency to get invested way too quickly. He needed to relax and understand that his dynamic with these people was never going to be completely normal. It would be fine.

Grian was, at the end of the day, just a plain old veterinarian. And this was, at the end of the day, just a really disturbing hobby.

But it was really hard to *stop* being invested when the first thing he saw upon switching on the television was the latest news report of a fight happening downtown. Just from reading the warning that flashed on the screen, he felt his blood pressure spike – first, out of surprise and worry for his villains, and secondly, out of anger.

It seemed like the Bamboozlers' latest scheme to throw the heroes off involved them switching around the usual time that they typically could be found committing crimes. Instead of late into the evening, they'd broken into the headquarters of a popular enterprise first thing in the morning.

Obviously, since the city was awake by that point, they were seen and reported by employees as they were coming in for their shift. It meant that they weren't able to escape without some kind of fight ensuing, however, it wasn't the heroes that arrived at the scene to stand in their way.

The Agency, having been caught so off guard by their timing, had no heroes available to get to the scene of the crime. They'd been forced to call in a favor, and not ten minutes after the report was filed, a pair of well-known vigilantes had arrived instead.

Vigilantes were few and far between in the city. Most of them were defected heroes, who had, for some reason or another, decided to part ways with the Agency while remaining in a position to uphold justice. They could be paid to watch over certain sectors of the city more than others, and were often a little less regulated with their methods of capturing criminals.

They weren't totally legal. So long as they didn't cause too much trouble, though, and there weren't entire groups of them running around trying to imitate the heroes, the Agency let them be. They had a symbiotic relationship. In times like these, where the heroes couldn't be somewhere that the vigilantes could, it came in handy for them.

The vigilantes on the scene that day were known as Audiophile and Werewolf. The two were formerly heroes, who'd parted ways with the Agency a few years back to turn heroics into a more directly monetary thing for their own benefit.

Their personalities were, in Grian's humble opinion, irritatingly theatrical. That was, of course, helped by the fact that their costumes were about as stereotypical as it could get for anyone running around playing hero. They were poster boys for what one might imagine if they thought of the city's modern-day crime fighters.

Audiophile wore a bandana over his eyes, with a base suit of green stretchy fabric underneath white armor plating that covered his chest, shoulders, knees, and elbows. His weapon of choice was a large sword – not unlike Furioso's twin katanas, but larger and obviously suited to his impressive muscle mass.

Werewolf remained true to his name when it came to his costume – sporting a headband with dog ears, and a tail attached to his belt. His eyes were covered by comically large tinted sunglasses, though the rest of him was decidedly less covered. His shirt, a flowy white thing, was halfway unbuttoned, revealing an impressive amount of chest hair underneath.

He was less protected by this costume, but he wore a corset of armor plating around his middle to make up for that. As for his weapons, Werewolf wore special metallic gloves that gave him makeshift claws, said to be capable of slicing anything if he put enough force into it.

No matter how flashy or ironically typical their outfits and personalities, the two were fairly well-trained. Their rates for successful capture of petty criminals was higher than quite a few of the Agency's newer debutantes, and they'd even managed to put a couple of amateur villains behind bars as of late. They were eccentric

and very skilled, making them wonderful hires for companies wanting to show off their ability to afford high-profile body guards.

Audiophile had a power known as Eavesdropping, where he could listen in on any conversation within his sightline. Combined with Werewolf's ability to take the form of any person he could see, the duo made for quite formidable opponents when it came to harnessing the element of surprise.

It meant that Grian woke up that morning to quite a vicious fight on television, mere hours after he'd watched Ringmaster collapse from an attack the night prior.

Screw their interpersonal issues – Grian was sending off a flurry of enraged messages before he could so much as make himself a cup of tea. He was maddened past the point of caring about etiquette or perception or his own personal routine. Ringmaster wouldn't see the texts until the fight was over, but he set loose a devastating amount of curses upon the man anyway.

Grian

What are you doing?

Grian

You're injured! Why are you out and about?!?!

Grian

Why did your teammates let you come on this heist? Why are you doing a heist in the first place?!?!?! Are you all idiots? Get away from that stupid fight this instant!

Maybe he was harsh, but he did not regret a single word of what he typed.

Those three *knew* the proper care regimens that the vet preached about on a daily basis, and yet they'd *still* gone and done the stupidest thing known to man! Whether he'd done something to get on their bad side or not, this was truly idiotic. He couldn't believe they would ignore what they should've damn well known to be compulsory for the basics of self preservation.

Now, they had an injured man traipsing around the battlefield, trying his best to appear like nothing was wrong, and it wasn't working.

Ringmaster was knocked off balance more times during this fight than any he'd ever seen before. Grian could only look on in abject horror as the cameras honed in on the exact moment when the vigilantes figured out his weakness – since it wasn't exactly sufficiently hidden from them.

Audiophile's heightened hearing had obviously caught on to the extra groans of pain he got whenever his blows landed on specific parts of the villain's body. His smile widened into one of sharp delight, and a laugh rang out loud enough for the drone's limited microphone set up to detect.

"That's right! You did *get hurt yesterday, didn't you?"* A half-crazed voice echoed through the street, Audiophile raising a finger to point in Ringmaster's direction. His modulator made his words come out in a ridiculously pitched-down intonation. *"It's our lucky day. This just got a whole lot easier!"*

Grian opened his phone again, preemptively sending a swarm of links about proper care for wounds that had been repeatedly agitated, even if Ringmaster knew the gist already. No harm in reinforcing his

knowledge, given how easily he and his Bamboozlers seemed to *forget* the stuff that mattered.

The fight only got worse from there.

Since Audiophile had alerted everyone in the city about Ringmaster's obvious weakness, both vigilantes had begun to target him. Werewolf was relentless in close combat, his metal claws bouncing off Eclipse's blade with such force that sparks quite literally flew between them. Audiophile was able to keep up with both Jimmy and Ringmaster while still being on the offensive due to his abundance of protective armor.

And since these were opponents that a skilled villain would struggle to defeat, even at their best, the Bamboozlers were quickly overwhelmed.

Eclipse couldn't use her blinding abilities whilst trying to protect her teammate, as they'd affect everyone in her vicinity, and Jimmy couldn't go without being struck long enough to turn invisible. Ringmaster's pain was outwardly messing with his ability to focus too, meaning his moments of power were short and spread out.

There was certainly no room for them to worry about their spoils, either. Several boxes of classified files had been dumped into three sacks for easy transport, but they were tossed aside uselessly now. That didn't seem like it would change anytime soon, judging by how engaged the vigilantes kept the Bamboozlers.

However, this fight wouldn't be able to go on forever.

The Agency might've been caught off guard when the ordeal initially happened, but if the newscaster was to be believed, they were doing

everything in their power to get an official hero on the ground as soon as possible. If someone like Slayer or Furioso arrived while they were already in this state, the Bamboozlers would be arrested in a matter of minutes.

It became immediately clear – at least to Grian – that the trio would have to choose between escaping with their lives, or successfully completing their heist.

They chose, as was best, to abandon their efforts.

Ringmaster could be seen leaning close to Eclipse during a brief lull, probably to whisper something. As soon as he'd backed off again to grapple with a charging Audiophile, the pink-haired villain changed her stance into one Grian had come to recognize.

Shadows overtook her body, then exploded outwards, crashing over each of the street's occupants. They were blinded, cast into formidable darkness. Audiophile and Werewolf stumbled back, shouting for the other and grasping useless. Jimmy and Ringmaster stayed silent, though by their tripping, it was clear they were in a similar state.

Eclipse grabbed the hands over her teammates and began dragging them off quickly. Though their escape was not graceful, they did manage to make it into the alleyways and out of the vigilantes' direct view.

The drone followed them to that point, but when Ringmaster's vision finally cleared, it took one wave of his hand for the lens to be overcome with a red glow and the footage to freeze. When it resumed, they were gone.

Grian never did receive a text back.

After the fight ended, five minutes turned into fifteen, then twenty, then thirty, then an hour had passed in which he hadn't received so much as a thumbs-up emoji in return for his fretting. He knew as much time had passed, because he'd seen each second tick by on the face of his new watch.

He no longer had a doubt. The Bamboozlers were avoiding him.

Disappointment and frustration clung to him like a second skin.

With nothing else to distract him until his shift later that night, Grian scrolled through his contact list and clicked the call button. Mumbo picked up after only two rings.

"Mumbo? I've just gotten the urge to go out for lunch," Grian said, putting falsified energy into his words. "Would you care to join me?"

Blushing lights worked in tandem with bustling bodies to bring an overwhelming heat and energy into the packed room. Grian revelled in the cold of the ice cubes within his drink, and the warmth in his cheeks. It worked well to keep his mind off the holes being burned into his head by his friend across the table.

"Grian, I do appreciate your company," Mumbo said, just loud enough to be heard over the music of the bar around them. His brow was raised, a quizzical tilt to his lips that implied this conversation was not going to go in a direction Grian liked. "It's just that this is the third time you've asked me out for a drink in the last week. I can't help but wonder if something is the matter?"

“Hm? Is something wrong?” Grian made a face, and hid it with a sip from his Moscow mule. The pang of the vodka was similar to the pang of his heart as it was twisted within his chest. The drink left his throat hot, and his confidence higher than it had any right to be. Only a few sips remained before he’d need to order another. “No, it’s nothing like that. Nothing’s wrong.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Mumbo scoffed. Grian was not the only one experiencing the effects of alcohol. There was a flush to his friend’s cheeks, as Mumbo had finished a glass of some fruity concoction before beginning his latest endeavor. “Seriously, you know you can tell me anything.”

Grian chewed on his lip, but didn’t immediately respond. He couldn’t, not when the television above the bar was recounting the exact reason for that evening’s upset – the act that had driven him to call Mumbo in the first place. There wasn’t any volume, but then again, he didn’t need noise to know what was happening beat for beat. He’d seen the live footage earlier, after all.

The Bamboozlers had gotten into another altercation today. Their string of minor heists had evolved slightly into something more like what villains should be doing. As they’d been intending to do the morning they’d fought Audiophile and Werewolf, lately, they’d begun to target more and more private data.

Usually, due to their lack of any solid pattern, they avoided most fights. Heroes would arrive at the scene too late, or anticipate them elsewhere, only to discover that the tip they’d received was a false lead.

By sheer luck, tonight’s attack *had* been interrupted, courtesy of the hero group known as the Gs.

No one was caught, which he remained oddly thankful for, but the fight was rough on both parties. Despite the Bamboozlers getting away, and the hero Blackhole sustaining internal damages from one of his teleports gone wrong, the news was reporting on it like it was a success. Grian guessed that meant whatever data drive they were aiming for had been recovered by the group.

However, when it came to the broadcasted reruns, the media was also making a point to only show specific clips – in which the heroes had the upper hand. They were changing the narrative to make it seem as though the victory was a landslide.

He saw drone footage of Jimmy being tossed into the side of a building, Eclipse getting the side of her gas mask smashed, and Ringmaster being forced to fight off three heroes at once. Jimmy struggled to stay invisible with the sheer amount of opponents, Eclipse blinded people as often as she could, but it was clearly making her tired, and Ringmaster's red glow practically never left his arm in an attempt to put more power into his punches.

It was just hard to contest against a team of five with a variety of some of the strongest abilities the Agency could boast. To encounter the full team at once, not split up due to outside circumstances, was terrifyingly bad luck. Anyone would falter, buckle under the weight. It was unsurprising that the Bamboozlers would have trouble holding their own.

At the very least, Grian didn't see any of them get stabbed or slashed on vital points. Plenty of cuts and bruises were distributed, though, and probably several broken ribs. The fight concluded when Eclipse's blinding power finally overlapped with both of her teammates also finding an out in their situation, and they all made a run for it.

Due to habit and despite what he knew to be true, Grian had expected

them to high-tail it to his apartment, and had waited in the living room in front of the television for two hours. By the start of the third hour, around nine in the evening, Grian realized they weren't going to show. Again.

So, as he'd done two other times that week after watching the people he cared about getting beaten bloody on the screen and promptly *not* coming to him for help, he called Mumbo.

Mumbo was always more than ready to hang out, especially if they were grabbing drinks, so that was what they'd done. In hindsight, maybe calling upon him thrice that week in rapid succession wasn't the most discrete choice. He should've switched it up, called Skizz or someone instead.

Except, Skizz was better at reading emotions, and that wasn't the energy he needed, so Mumbo was his default option. He really needed to talk to more people.

Grian hadn't *actually* wanted to appear down in the dumps in the eyes of his friends. This was just supposed to replace the emptiness of his apartment and the radio silence he was getting from his usual company. He didn't need to worry anyone, or acknowledge the growing hole in his routine that had been eating him alive for a week and a half, so long as he had a valid distraction.

To ease the aching embarrassment at being found out, Grian downed the rest of his drink in two big gulps. It was a horrible decision, and he smacked his lips in disgust to try and counteract the sharp sting of the alcohol. Mumbo made a flabbergasted noise and said, "Dude, was that necessary?"

"I was getting bored of this drink," Grian lied. The watch on his wrist ticked rhythmically. "Wanted a different one."

“And you could only do that by chugging what you had?” Mumbo pinched the bridge of his nose, highly disappointed. “Grian, can’t you talk to me like a normal person?”

Grian narrowed his eyes, considering the offer. It wasn’t feasible, not really, to drum up everything that had taken place over the last several months. There was simply too much, and a good majority of it couldn’t be mentioned at all. No matter what he said, some part of it would have to be a lie to keep Mumbo and Grian’s other companions both safe.

Sighing, Grian opted to say what he could.

“A friend of mine is… ignoring me,” Grian grumbled. He stared down at his empty copper mug, and the melting ice within. A buzzing static had begun to envelope his brain. “I *thought* we were going to hang out this week, but he’s not even texted me.”

“Grian,” Mumbo gasped, and Grian’s eyes jumped up to him.

His shocked tone worried the vet. Mumbo was smart – there was a chance he could put pieces together and reach a conclusion that was less than ideal for everyone involved. Grian crossed his fingers under the table, hoping for the best.

“I didn’t know you had friends beyond me!”

Grian stopped. His mouth twisted down into a frown. “Mumbo, what are you–?”

“Sorry, that sounded rude,” Mumbo chuckled. “You had that one guy pop by the vet, but besides him, you’ve never mentioned friends before. I figured I was your only one.”

“Um,” Grian said. “No.”

“That’s great! I have competition for the first time ever.” Mumbo clapped his hands together happily, but then his own word choice sank in and his brows furrowed. “Oh dear. I have competition.”

Grian sighed, “Hardly. Did you miss the part where I said he’s not talking to me right now?”

“Ah, true,” Mumbo said, brightening just a bit too much to be comforting. “Do you know why he might be doing that?”

The vet thought about it, but all of his theories were too difficult to explain without revealing who exactly his friend was to Mumbo. His head was too light to think of reasonable replacements for this particular situation. Grian opted to shrug instead of letting himself speak.

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound pleasant,” Mumbo said, offering him a reassuring smile. The lopsided way it moved his mustache did work to improve the depressed man’s mood slightly. “Thanks for telling me, at least. How about I buy the next drink? What do you want?”

Grian accepted Mumbo’s charity, and they remained at the bar for another hour and a half. They did a couple of shots, and then he got a cosmopolitan, with his companion going for a margarita to round out the night. Neither of them would have the best taste in their mouths after the fact, but they didn’t care in the moment.

His friend did a wonderful job of keeping his mind from straying by steadily helping him get more wasted. The two weren't lightweights, but their evening consisted of enough variety to make a mess of anyone. Grian felt sufficiently woozy by the time they called it quits. Mumbo was hit harder though, having apparently only eaten a small dinner before agreeing to tag along.

"C'mon, man," Grian huffed, focusing really hard on keeping his friend upright as they stumbled together out of the bar. The night air was chilly, but the burn of alcohol kept them both warm. The taxi he'd called was already waiting at the corner when Grian got them there. He spoke briefly to the driver, confirming the address, and then loaded his friend in.

He waited until the car was out of sight to take a deep breath and consider going home himself. There was no need for another taxi, since his apartment was fairly close. Still, his feet didn't move. His whole body protested the idea heavily, actually.

Grian knew what would be waiting for him at home — his two cats, and absolutely nothing else. No handsome strangers, no thinly veiled threats, no almost-friends, no problems in need of solutions. No Ringmaster.

He wasn't looking forward to it.

Sighing, he let his gaze drift to the sky overhead. It was inky black, stars blocked out by familiar light pollution. Distantly, he saw the blinking of a plane, and heard the passing whir of cars. The sidewalks murmured with a scattered crowd, none paying mind to the drunken statue the vet had become.

While he stayed perfectly still, the world kept moving around him. Grian wished, half-heartedly, that he could remain stationary forever. That way, he wouldn't have to put so much effort into things that never paid off. He wouldn't have to think about the result of his every action. He wouldn't have to face consequences for offenses he hadn't known he'd made.

"Doctor?"

Grian's eyes widened, and he spun around with a dangerous speed.

As soon as his gaze landed on a figure behind him on the sidewalk, his vision blurred and he tipped. The buzzing overcame him, enveloping his senses completely. His feet were mere suggestions, hanging uselessly beneath him. Without a doubt, he was going to fall and land flat on his face.

"Woah! Grian, be careful!"

Warm arms wrapped around his torso, and his forehead landed on someone's chest. The feeling of falling stopped. Immediately, he felt steadier, less unbalanced. He had an anchor to keep himself firmly planted, rooted in reality. The vet hadn't realized how much he needed it until then.

Grian worked to blink away spots and fuzzy nothingness. His vision gradually began to even out enough to decipher a decent amount of details again. He saw a green shirt, and a pair of jeans that fell vaguely over some black sneakers. Slowly, he pulled back enough to let his eyes move up.

First, he was able to make out tanned skin, well-built shoulders, and mussed brown hair. Looking higher, he noticed that the man in front

of him wore a fabric mask over the lower half of his face, and had a variety of scars around the areas that weren't blocked from view.

It was when Grian met bright green eyes that his breath hitched and the man's familiarity registered to him. Though his tongue was heavy and his head still spun a bit, he managed to whisper, "Ringmaster?"

"Oh, no! Don't call me that here," the other man hissed, glancing around. Grian definitely recognized his voice now that he had a frame of reference. Sober or not, he couldn't believe he'd ever missed it – especially considering how this same man had been haunting him for days now. "What are you doing here, Grian?"

It took a second for the vet to realize that questions usually required answers.

"Um, I was getting a drink with my friend," Grian answered, a little dazed and floaty. "What are *you* doing here?"

"My house is down the street. I was on a walk to clear my head." Ringmaster glanced around, confused. Grian's mind hooked onto the mention of the other man's house – such a normal thing for a villain to have – looping that phrase over and over again. "Where's your friend?"

Grian almost missed this question too. "He… just went home."

The vet simply gaped up at him, wholly consumed with his thoughts. Grian couldn't *believe* that Ringmaster was standing in front of him, and in casual wear of all things, talking about civilian stuff like houses and late-night walks. He wasn't even adorned in his usual gas mask. And while, sure, he'd gotten glimpses of the other man in similar outfits, he was taking him in fully now.

It didn't feel entirely real.

"I assume you're heading home too, then?" Ringmaster tilted his head. Grian's gaze darted towards the way strands of hair fell into his face with the movement. They were usually slicked back so as not to interrupt villain work, only taking on a different style if the fight had messed it up. To see it in its relaxed form was oddly mesmerizing. "Doctor?"

"Hm?" Grian blinked back to reality. He didn't have the mental capacity to deny the way his heart rate picked up the slightest bit at the nickname. "Sorry, yes. I'm just a little… y'know."

"Tipsy? Yeah, I can tell," the other man laughed. It was a brilliant sound, the kind that reverberated through Grian's skull and settled in his chest. "Are you waiting for a ride?"

Illuminated by the neon signs of the bar and the hanging lamplight overhead, Ringmaster looked softer than Grian had ever seen him before. There were no hard edges to this version of him. No visible blood stains, threatening glares, or wanted posters with this face on them when he was like this. It was almost like looking at a completely different person. Those eyes were the same though. Grian *really* liked his eyes.

"Um, no," the vet replied to the best of his ability. He frowned, struggling somehow to remember what he'd planned for himself. "No, it's close, so I'm… gonna walk."

Ringmaster's signature laughter lines appeared as Grian could only assume his smile widened. "Walking, hm? In this state?"

It was hard for the vet to tell through the haze that covered everything in his mind, but he was pretty sure he was being mocked a little bit. Grian frowned, furrowing his brows and weakly punching at the other man's chest. "What state? I'm perfectly capable of getting home just fine."

"Right, G, totally," Ringmaster hummed, that cozy voice of his overflowing with fondness. "And I'm just going to walk next to you the entire way to confirm exactly how capable you are."

"I'm not drunk enough to miss your sarcasm," Grian replied, but he couldn't make himself argue more. The idea of leaving right now, putting this man behind him and being resigned to silence for another unknown span of time was beyond unpleasant. He'd already gone so long without him. He couldn't do it anymore.

Without an alternative, he sighed and let his head lull forward onto the other's shoulder – not unlike Ringmaster had done to him a while ago. It was comfortable. He kind of didn't want to sit up ever again. Grian wondered absently if the other man would let him stay forever.

Maybe not in the middle of the sidewalk, though. The sound of passing cars was going to give him a headache. They'd been nice before, but now that he had an anchor beyond them, they were bothersome. The vet didn't care for anything outside of the person he was leaning on.

As time passed, he could feel his head getting a little fuzzier. The chilly atmosphere was helping, but he didn't want to be exposed to the city's bright lights much longer. There was only one option left.

"Fine," Grian groaned, resigning himself to having to move, if only so that he could return to stillness in a better end location. "Come with me."

“What was that, Doctor? You’re mumbling.”

Grian backed up to meet Ringmaster’s eyes, suddenly determined. “I want you to come home with me.”

Immediately, the man holding him paused, buffering. His face flushed the loveliest shade of pink, and the hands that rested on Grian’s upper arms squeezed a little tighter. “You,” Ringmaster whispered. “You, um, what?”

“I want you to come home with me,” Grian repeated, getting slightly frustrated. He couldn’t understand why Ringmaster wasn’t getting it. This made perfect sense to him. “Walk me home? Please?”

“Walk you home,” Ringmaster echoed, barely audible. “Yes, of course, obviously. Anything for you, Doctor.”

Grian didn’t have to ask again. The villain took a step back, cold air rushing to fill the space where he’d been, and linked their arms. It was enough contact for the time being, but the vet was already missing what he had before.

Slowly, so as not to disorient the inebriated man more, they started down the street.

The two walked for several minutes in silence, arm-in-arm, shoulders bumping. Ringmaster guided Grian when his stumbling feet didn’t work quite right, never losing that amused gleam in his eyes.

Grian kept his gaze glued to the side of his companion's head until they reached his home. Somehow, it was impossible to look away, even when Ringmaster instructed him to watch where he was going. His brain prioritized keeping the villain in his sights rather than avoiding obstacles on the ground below.

A distance that would've probably taken an hour for the drunken man to cross alone was covered in a brisk fifteen minutes. Ringmaster detached their arms as they stopped at the door to his apartment, which woke Grian from the weird trance he'd been stuck in.

At that point, the vet had to concern himself over the monstrous process of fishing his keys out of his pocket, the sharp jingling hurting his ears. However, when he finally did manage to get them safely in his hand and returned his gaze to his front door, it was already open.

Grian blinked slowly once, twice, then a third time.

"How did you–?"

"I made myself a mold of your key a while ago," Ringmaster explained, gently leading him through the threshold. The cats were shooed away so as not to trip the two of them further. As soon as he had Grian seated safely on the couch, the villain locked the door and returned to the living room. "Figured you didn't want me coming in through your window every time."

A more sober version of Grian would've been really worried about that admittance. Or maybe flattered – it was hard for his foggy brain to recall what he usually thought about abnormal acts committed by this particular man. For some reason, he had the slightest inkling that Ringmaster was the exception to most of his rules.

Either way, in his current state, Grian could only huff out a surprised laugh. “You’re out of your mind.”

Ringmaster shrugged. “I’d prefer to call myself innovative, but that works too.”

Grian let his head fall onto the cushion behind him, satisfied after the journey.

His eyes shut, but around him, he could hear the other man shuffling. He probably should’ve had a problem with how easily Ringmaster navigated his home, as if he belonged in it, but Grian couldn’t muster even the slightest bit of irritation. There were a lot of things he probably should’ve been feeling.

“Sit up, G,” Ringmaster called, coming from the direction of the kitchen. “Drink some water.”

Grian did as he was told, sitting up and taking a glass from the other man. While he sipped, Ringmaster knelt, and started unlacing his shoes. Grian watched him slip off the right, then the left. From this new angle, the collar of his shirt dipped down, allowing the vet to see the edge of a bandage hidden beneath.

“You’re hurt,” Grian muttered. He set aside his water and reached down. Ringmaster froze, eyes locked on the floor as the vet’s wandering hands tugged at the collar of his shirt to allow him to see better. “Is this the… the sword injury?”

Ringmaster swallowed, finally turning his gaze up to Grian. Something unreadable was hidden in it. “Were you watching that fight?”

In response to the most ridiculous question he'd ever been asked, Grian scoffed, "Was I watching that fight? Really? Obviously, idiot. I watch as many of your fights as I can."

"You," Ringmaster whispered. "You do?"

"Yeah, of course," Grian retorted. Frustrated that he couldn't get a better view of the wound in question, he tugged harder on the collar of his shirt, yanking his companion forward a bit in the process. "Take this off."

The other man did not respond, simply staring at him with the widest eyes physically possible. There was not an ounce of his skin that hadn't flushed a scarlet red. His fabric mask shifted as he seemed to take a deep breath in. "Why?"

"I have to make sure you're okay," Grian said with a bluntness that was only possible for someone significantly under the influence and therefore incapable of shame. "You didn't let me earlier."

"Oh, right." Ringmaster cleared his throat. "I'm not sure that's necessary, Doctor. I *feel* fine–"

"I don't believe you," Grian snapped. "In fact, I won't rest until I have a chance to check it myself."

The villain made a noise of distress. "What? Grian, really, I'm alright. You have to get some sleep soon or you'll feel awful tomorrow."

"No," Grian said, remaining steadfast. "Let me do my job."

Ringmaster seemed to realize he wasn't going to give up, and furrowed his brows. He lifted his hands to the hem of his shirt, hesitating. Finally, the villain sighed and pulled it over his head, careful not to disrupt his mask. It was tossed aside, revealing the full extent of his bandages.

"Fine," he replied. "If it'll satisfy you, Doctor."

They were, in actuality, fairly well done. The bandages were tied off cleanly, and appeared to have been changed at regular intervals. Grian reached over like he was about to unwrap them, only to pause halfway there. A bit of common sense whispered in the back of his mind that he'd be wasting perfectly good bandages if he followed through.

Though, he did still want to help. Grian hadn't been given the chance previously, and now, at long last, he had Ringmaster in front of him. It was his job to ensure his patient was as well taken care of as he could be.

Something came to him – an idea that he wouldn't have entertained for even a moment under different circumstances. Now, however, he didn't hesitate.

Grian leaned over and placed a kiss on the curve of Ringmaster's shoulder, right on the edge of his bandages. The other man whirled around, shock evident in his expression. Grian hadn't known it was possible for a blush to reach down one's neck and consume all visible skin as well, but Ringmaster had managed such a feat before his very eyes.

"Kissed it better," the vet simply said, as if that explained his strange

behavior at all. “I’m done.”

“Right,” Ringmaster whispered, voice so low that it was hardly audible. His chest rose and fell quickly as he stared at Grian. The vet shifted in his seat a bit under the weight of the attention, which seemed to snap his companion into reality again. He cleared his throat and slipped his shirt back on. “Thank you.”

“Mhm,” Grian hummed. Now that his clumsy attempt at doing his job was complete, his attention moved to the uncomfortable lumps in his pockets that were beginning to dig into his leg. With uncoordinated hands, he pulled everything out at once. His wallet, keys, and phone were dumped onto the couch beside him.

Ringmaster quietly picked them up and moved them to the coffee table. Nothing would be able to slip between cushions and get lost there. Then, the glass of water was being pushed into his hands again. Grian sipped idly.

Pearl and Maui chose that moment to come over to rub up against the man kneeling on his floor. They didn’t pay their owner any mind, probably assuming their visitor would present them with treats again. Though that obviously didn’t happen, Ringmaster did scratch the tops of their heads enough to appeal to their neediness.

Grian hadn’t remembered just how normal the other man looked in his apartment. He was like a fixture, part of the furniture, something always meant to be there – according to the vet’s delusional dreamy state, at least. They’d only known each other for an objectively short while, weeks adding up to just a handful of months, but his company had become so central that losing it created a vacuum.

Before he could really think about it, he was blurting, “Where were you?”

“Hm?” Ringmaster paused his cooing at the cats to glance up at Grian. “What do you mean?”

“Where have you been this past week?” Grian’s throat grew tight. It was mortifying how easily otherwise pent-up emotions came to him when the vet let go of his inhibitions for a night. He couldn’t disguise the genuine hurt in his voice as he said, “I’ve *missed* you.”

A beat passed, and the villain sucked in a breath. “Oh.”

“I saw you on the news,” Grian went on, tongue loose despite how the memories brought a thrumming ache to his heart. The broaching of this damning topic was helping to sober him slightly. “You didn’t come to me for help, didn’t even contact me. A whole week and a half of *nothing*. Why?”

“Oh, Grian,” Ringmaster exhaled. He put his hands on Grian’s knees and leaned forward. The vet crossed his arms over his chest, forcing a barrier between them. Ringmaster clearly noticed, if the concern flashing through his eyes was any indication. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just… thought you needed space.”

“Space?” Grian scoffed. He assumed it was the alcohol that elevated how ridiculous that statement sounded. His phone hadn’t remained open on unread text messages for days on end to simply be told *he* was the one encouraging their friendship to be put on the backburner. Not a moment later, he was shaking his head and muttering, “Space is the *last* thing I want.”

He froze, realizing exactly how incriminating that could be. Grian glanced at his companion, trying to see if any part of his tone had indicated what he’d truly meant. Instead of meeting his gaze,

however, Ringmaster was staring at the ground, brows furrowed and eyes layered with sadness.

"But… I thought you were tired of helping us with simple stuff," Ringmaster said, voice cracking. "No one had a bad enough injury this week, so I figured it was best to let you… relax."

Grian frowned. He didn't like that Ringmaster wasn't making eye contact, didn't like that sad tone, didn't like that he was making Grian feel badly for something he and his Bamboozlers had done without even consulting him. He set his water cup down again.

Harshly, the vet reached over and smacked both of his hands over the other man's cheeks. Grian tipped his head up and leaned in. They were close enough that, were there not a mask in the way, their breaths would've intermingled, and their noses might've brushed.

Grian went a bit cross-eyed from the sudden increase in angle, but he held his very woozy ground. Ringmaster remained completely still, eyes blown wide and glistening in the low light of the room.

"I didn't ask you to leave," Grian told him. "I was tired that one day, but even then, I wanted you here."

Ringmaster blinked, shocked into silence, so the vet continued.

"I always want you here. You make my life weird and hard and exhausting," Grian grumbled, squishing the other's face as he spoke. "And nothing makes sense when you're around, but that doesn't mean I want it to *stop."*

Another second passed, and Grian took a deep breath. He released Ringmaster, falling back onto the couch. There were several beats in which neither of them made a sound.

"I will never understand you, Doctor," he heard Ringmaster start. Lazily, Grian let his head dip just enough to return the baffled stare sent his way. "No matter how much I assume I've finally got a good idea of how you work, you turn my world upside-down. I can't get enough of it."

Grian bit his tongue to keep his mind from lurching in a direction he didn't want it to go. He didn't need to imagine pulling the other man closer, holding him near enough that he'd never leave again. He didn't need to imagine seeing his face every day, talking to him often enough to stray away from this distance they constantly held between themselves.

These weren't safe thoughts to have, not when the focus of them was right in front of him, not when he still couldn't totally trust his own actions. He feared his secret intentions might show through, become clear in his face to the point that Ringmaster would read into it and *know*.

"If you can't get enough of me," Grian said. "Then don't avoid me again. You, Eclipse, and Timmy. No more leaving me out."

Ringmaster studied him for a minute more, as if trying to figure out if he was really telling the truth – if he really did want the trio around. He must've seen something pleasant, because his eyes crinkled soon after, and he gave in.

"Whatever you want, Doctor," Ringmaster replied. He stood, and collapsed down on the couch beside Grian. Their shoulders brushed, hands resting dangerously close. "I promise we'll check in with you

when we can from now on. No more leaving you out. I'll pass the message on to Jimmy and Eclipse too."

"How are they?"

"Hm?"

"Timmy and Eclipse," Grian specified. "I saw you all taking pretty bad hits today. Timmy couldn't even stay invisible for more than a minute."

Ringmaster's brow twitched. "They're fine."

"Really?"

"Really," the villain insisted. "I wrapped their injuries myself, and I learned from the best."

"Yeah, I guess you did." Grian smiled. "That's good."

They lapsed into silence. Grian was comfortable with it, basking in the pleasant hum still vaguely present in the tips of his fingers. It seemed his companion was less so. Ringmaster crossed his arms, finger tapping over and over again.

"You know, it's funny," Ringmaster started after a minute, with a tone that lacked any of the humor that was supposed to accompany that descriptor. "Hearing you call Jimmy by his real name, I mean. Or, well, as close as you ever get to his name."

Whatever Grian had been expecting, it wasn't that. He frowned at his companion. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just," Ringmaster stammered. The tips of his ears were twinging pink. They'd done that often recently. "We've known each other longer, but you're only on a first name basis with Jimmy."

The vet was pretty sure there was subtext he was missing, but he was still barely beginning to come down from the worst of his drunken haze. There was no chance he was going to catch any amount of subtlety tonight. So, he responded to the surface-level statements instead.

"That's not really *my* fault. I wasn't supposed to know personal stuff about you guys." Grian raised a brow and swallowed. Anxiety nipped at him. "Why are you bringing it up? Should I stop calling him that?"

"It's not bad. I'm sure Jimmy doesn't mind at all," Ringmaster replied, but it felt like he was avoiding the question.

Grian watched him closely. "You say that as though *you* mind."

Suddenly, Ringmaster was adjusting his position again. His torso turned, allowing him to fully face Grian. His eyes were hesitant, struggling to fully meet the vet's gaze. They kept slipping down Grian's face and lingering there.

"I might mind," Ringmaster said, tone quiet. "Just a little."

A hand shifted to ghost over Grian's open palm. The contact sent sparks rocketing up his spine.

"As ridiculous as it is," the villain whispered. "It makes me wish you'd call me by *my* real name too."

"That *is* ridiculous," Grian laughed nervously. His cheeks were hot, but it was different from the warmth provided by alcohol. He felt like he was dangling over the edge of a cliff. "I don't even know your real name."

"Scar."

Grian blinked, frowning. "Excuse me?"

"My name," Ringmaster said. "My name is Scar."

Everything came to a screeching halt. The vet sobered entirely in a second, the haze dissipating to make room for newfound clarity. A single word took over Grian's brain, looping over and over again. He opened his mouth, drawing in a breath.

Shakily, he heard himself whisper, "Scar?"

The name fit perfectly between his lips, tasted right upon his tongue, and weighed heavily on his soul. It felt comfortable, like he was always meant to know it. Grian's chest ached. His vision spun. His sole anchor, the one feature of the universe that remained solid and perfectly within focus, was the other man.

Scar.

Scar smiled, green eyes crinkling. “Hi, Grian.”

Something between them seemed to crack. It was as though Grian was beholding the world through an entirely new lens.

This was no longer a dangerous criminal with a couple of moments of humanity shining through. This was no longer an anonymous stranger that he could questionably think of as a friend. This was a person, with a name and a home and casual clothes and beautiful eyes and the sweetest laugh and Grian couldn’t make his heart slow down.

“Hey, Scar,” Grian choked out. A treacherous confession tipped to the edge of his lips, one he hadn’t even fully known to be harboring until right at that moment. It had to be reeled in, replaced with a hasty, “I think I’m… really drunk right now.”

And that wasn’t a true admittance anymore, not entirely. He’d come down a lot, thanks to the effects of time and the sips of water settling in his system. Still, it was the only excuse he could think of to communicate his dizziness and heavy tongue, which originated now from a totally different source.

Grian was mortified by how immensely this one new piece of information had affected him. Scar tilted his head, amusement coating his expression. To some degree, he seemed to sense the struggle the vet was undergoing.

“We should get you to bed.” The other man stood, giving a big stretch. Grian’s eyes dipped to the way his shirt rode up as he raised his arms, and then snapped back as Scar held a hand out to him. “Come on, G.”

He tried to be nonchalant, taking it and standing with minimal need for assistance. It was hard to be entirely calm, though, when Scar did not let go of his hand while leading him down the length of the hall. Their fingers intertwined perfectly, slotting together like pieces of an endlessly confusing puzzle. He escorted Grian to his room, and paused there.

“I’ll let you take care of the rest,” Scar said, a finality to his tone. “Goodnight, Grian. I’ll see you again soon.”

“Alright,” Grian whispered. “Goodnight, Scar.”

Scar smiled, and squeezed his hand. He took a step back, staring for a moment, before returning the way they’d come. Grian stayed there until he heard the click and lock of his front door shutting.

Stumbling steps managed to get him into bed. He fell asleep nearly the second his head hit the pillow, pulled in that direction by alcohol and a new sort of giddiness that he didn’t have the words to describe. Whether or not those feelings were translated into his dreams was entirely his business.

Chapter End Notes

> HAPPY TUESDAY!! WE'RE OFFICIALLY HALFWAY THROUGH THE FIC!! WHO'S EXCITED? I KNOW I AM!! This was one of my favorite chapters to write as well, so I hope it was fun to read!
>
> Thank you guys so much for an astounding 40k hits, I really cannot even fathom how that's possible, but I am so so so grateful for all the support! Truly, the fanart, tiktoks, discord messages, and obsessive tweets have been so encouraging! I love you all <3
>
> As a reminder, I did make a discord server last week which you can join here! You'll be able to get notifications whenever I post, and chat with me more directly!

As always, none of this would be possible without my beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! See you next Tuesday!!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It'd been a very long time since Grian had woken up with a hangover quite as bad as the morning after his night with Mumbo. He wasn't blackout drunk — remembered everything quite well, actually — but the effects certainly tried to make him feel as though he was.

Immediately, he was aware of his own drunken forgetfulness in the form of his blinds not being drawn. Sunlight poured in, burning his eyes and churning in his skull. He couldn't think through the pounding agitation there, made worse by a wave of dizziness when he attempted to sit up.

His whole body felt heavy, like something was sitting on his chest. Grian hadn't been quite so weighed down since the time a Great Dane had gotten loose and barreled into him full-force two months prior. He wasn't exactly pleased to experience the sensation again.

It took a few minutes for him to work up the motivation to get out of bed, and longer still to hobble into the bathroom to pop some painkillers. His reflection looked dejectedly back at him as he swallowed around the pills and grimaced at the taste in his mouth.

Grian sighed, resigning himself to a few more minutes of pain while he tried to tame his bedhead. He really should've chugged a whole lot more water the night before. Maybe he would've if he hadn't been… distracted.

The vet paused, taking a deep breath in.

Ringmaster's name, a kiss upon the shoulder, fingers intertwined with his own.

He was mortified. Grian was going to crawl into a hole and die, or change his name and move to another city. At the very least, he was never going to drink like that again. Grian had only ever seriously allowed himself to let go that much around Mumbo before.

What a *horrifying* way to find out that he was a touchy drunk.

Kissing his friend's shoulder and invading his personal space was a new low for him. There was no way he was going to recover. The nightmarish mental picture of Ringmaster – *Scar* – staring at him in abject horror as he'd done such stupid things would be haunting the vet until the sun died.

God, Scar's face had been so red, his eyes so wide, his jaw dropped to the floor. He had really, truly been shocked at that. Grian couldn't even blame him if he never wanted to be near the vet while he was drunk again. It would be a completely reasonable reaction, and one he would probably have to.

Imagining their positions flipped, if he were taking care of Scar while he was drunk – unlikely as that was with their individual identities in play – that stuff would've shocked him too. Without a doubt. If Scar leaned in without telling him, pressed lips to his skin, whispered comments that could easily be misconstrued into his ears, then Grian would…

Grian would…

Well, he most certainly wouldn't be *calm* about the situation at all.

And, in fact, even the picture playing behind his eyes now had a strange effect on him. Not unpleasant, per say, but definitely strange. Inexplicably so.

Grian slumped against the sink, something new blooming in his chest. It reminded him of nausea, worked to heighten the symptoms of his dizziness, but burned like nothing else. The feeling sparked along his fingertips, ran through his lips, found an end behind his ribs, and refused to stop.

“What–?”

His hand drifted up to rest over his heart. It was hammering furiously, almost like it was trying to break free, though he wasn’t sure what was causing it.

Grian was scared, he realized suddenly. That had to be it. His racing pulse, sweaty palms, and quickened breathing were explained easily by an emotion of that variety. Although, for the life of him, Grian couldn’t figure out *why*.

Was it because of the name he’d learned?

Honestly, the vet wasn’t worried about getting his head lopped off this time around, since his standings with the Bamboozlers were all relatively positive. Maybe it was still possible that he was having some twisted version of a pavlovian response to the information?

Last time, when he’d accidentally stumbled across Jimmy’s real name, he’d nearly died. It was only due to the trio’s generosity and his own unthreatening nature that it hadn’t amounted to anything. Perhaps his

self preservation instincts – few and far between as they were – had kicked in for this scenario specifically. There was nothing else, with his limited cognizant ability, it really could be besides a delayed fear response.

Regardless of the emotions ailing him, Grian forced himself to focus on the present. He made himself breakfast, fed the cats, and then got himself ready for work. The painkillers did kick in somewhere in the middle of that, which was a huge relief. Not all of his grogginess and grossness had faded, but the worst was over.

After he was dressed in his scrubs, he collected his bag and left. Grian had slept in late enough that his shift was nearly upon him, giving the vet little time to truly recover from his night out. Not that it was horrendously necessary. He'd operated on less fumes in the past and been alright.

The walk was peaceful, uninterrupted. There were no villain attacks or people crowding the sidewalks to speak to heroes. Grian got to his job without any problems.

Mumbo was not present – but Grian had expected as much. His friend wouldn't have agreed to go out if he had a shift anytime before the early evening the next day. He was more practical than Grian in that regard, certainly kinder to himself.

Skizz was there, though, friendly and talkative as ever. Grian barely had time to situate himself when he'd been engaged in conversation. He could not, however, keep track of it in the slightest. Skizz wasn't talking particularly fast or about anything confusing, but the hangover was still clinging onto life in Grian's skull, slowing his reaction time down significantly.

"G-man," Skizz tutted eventually, raising a brow. "I feel like I'm not

getting to you."

"Sorry, sorry. I zoned out," Grian replied, doing his best impression of someone who had been actively listening. "You were saying something about your friend?"

Fortunately, it was easy to get Skizz to dive into his topic again, even if it wasn't easy to follow along. Since they weren't busy at the moment either, the other vet was happy to just trail behind Grian while he went about his business, yapping away. Several things were checked off his to-do list with his friend at his side and a lingering bad taste in his mouth.

Skizz didn't seem to notice that his contributions were shallow at best and nonsensical at worst. As terrible as it was, Grian couldn't give more. If he weren't so dreadfully occupied with the heaviness in his own shoulders, he definitely would've done his best to be adequate company. As it was, he wouldn't be able to make himself focus on much outside of his own inner turmoil for long enough to genuinely reply.

"Doctor," one of the techs called as they came around the corner. They seemed surprised to see Grian there, having obviously not realized Skizz was talking to someone, given how quiet the other end of the conversation had been. Grian received a wave, and then their attention was away again. "The dog in exam room four is ready for you."

"Oh, perfect, perfect," Skizz chirped, clapping his hands together. He gave Grian a firm smack on the back, nearly knocking him over in the process, and then skipped away to do his job. "Bye, G!"

Grian was left alone to wander to the lobby again, ready to check over the schedule for the day. He was not expecting to step behind the desk

right as the bell on the door chimed. A man stepped inside, a carrier crate under one arm and a hood pulled over his head. Grian watched him approach the desk, neck bent to keep his face out of view. There were no other people in their waiting room, though, so the vet couldn't understand why he was acting this way.

"Excuse me, sir," Grian called, causing the man to flinch *hard* and for the crate in his arms to give an irritated hiss. A cat, then. "May I help you with anything? Do you have an appointment or is this an emergency visit?"

"Um," the man started. "No appointment, but it's not, uh… not an emergency either."

Grian frowned. Something about the guy's voice was familiar to him. Not quite the sound of it, though — higher pitched and bashful. It was more the cadence and the tonality of the words, the way his sentence was strung together, that drew Grian's attention. He got the strangest inkling in the back of his mind, even through the lingering weariness of the night prior's activities.

The vet straightened, almost certain that a good look would put all of his fears to rest. "Wait a minute… Lift your head."

The man took a deep breath in, and did as he was told.

Grian slammed his hands down on the desk, leaning forward fast enough to send a couple of papers flying. "Timmy?"

"Oh, gosh, Grian," Jimmy groaned through his fabric mask. His brown eyes were unmistakable, and his nose scrunched with annoyance in a way that Grian knew by heart, because he'd seen it a million times. The voice was a surprise, though. "You have to use that name even

here?"

"You mean, *your* name?" Grian nodded. "Obviously. And who is this little guy?"

The vet turned his attention down to the carrier, where a fluffy face was lingering by the door. In truth, he didn't need to be introduced. He had seen pictures of Jimmy's cats before enough times to recognize the little guy instantly.

"Hello, Norman," Grian cooed. "Are you not feeling well, buddy?"

"It's the same stuff as I mentioned the other day," Jimmy sighed. "I wanted to bring him in sooner, but our, uh, mutual friend told me not to bother you. I'm not sure I'm even allowed to be here right now."

"Hm? Oh, Scar?" Grian reached a finger through the bars of the door to let Norman sniff him. He wasn't really thinking about what he was saying. "It's fine. We got it sorted. That was all one big misunderstanding."

"What did you just say?"

Grian paused, glancing up. Jimmy had gone very still, eyes widened in disbelief and face pale. The vet hadn't seen him wear an expression like that since…

Oh *God.*

Scar hadn't told the other Bamboozlers that Grian knew his name.

"How did you—? Why do you—?" Jimmy stammered, raising a quivering hand to point at him. "You called him—!"

"Scar, yes, I did," Grian confirmed quickly. He made a placating motion, coming around the desk to be face to face with Jimmy. The other was horrified, white as snow. "Listen, Tim. It's no big deal. He told me last night and—"

"Last night?" Jimmy practically shouted now. Grian shushed him, looking around. There were no vet techs checking in on their conversation yet, but that probably wouldn't be the case for long. "He saw you last night? After he practically threatened us with a swift end if we bothered you unnecessarily again?"

Grian frowned. "He did what?"

Jimmy didn't answer him, much too preoccupied. "He saw you behind our backs, and then he told you his *name?* Oh, Eclipse is going to eat this up."

"Well," Grian fumbled, suddenly feeling flustered. The odd sensation from that morning came back without explanation, fluttering in his gut. His face felt hot. "He was taking care of me while I was drunk, and one thing led to another—"

"One thing led to another?" Jimmy's eyes bulged wider. "Did he finally—?"

"Don't cut me off, Tim," Grian groaned, though this reaction was

weird, even for him.

Grian hadn't noticed anything abnormal until Scar was mentioned, and then, all at once, a cacophony of things he couldn't digest was being thrown at him. Though he couldn't diagnose the reason, his temper got a lot shorter, mind racing to overanalyze everything the other was saying, and another bout of rapid pounding starting up in his heart.

He must just be scared that Jimmy was jumping to conclusions about him — that was a reasonable line of thinking. Jimmy was friendly towards him recently, but he was once the Bamboozler most likely to end his life. To witness him have such a bad reaction towards Grian's new knowledge was bound to stir up loads of unpleasantness.

"Scar told me his name because we've known each other for a while, and it was frustrating to him that I didn't know it," Grian clarified. "Nothing nefarious or whatever you were thinking."

Jimmy's furrowed brows certainly implied a level of continued terror. "Nothing nefarious… Yeah, I'm sure. Not on *your* end, at least. You're far too dense."

"Dense?" Grian's jaw dropped. "What in the world—"

"Not that I blame you," Jimmy interrupted, putting his free hand on his hip and tutting. "I bet it hasn't even registered as a possibility in your mind when it comes to him. Anyone else acting so painfully stupid around you, and you would've noticed for sure."

"Noticed?" Grian blinked, thoroughly out of his depth. "Noticed what? Is someone hurt again or something?"

“Ah, there it is. You only think about work around us,” Jimmy said, snapping his fingers as though he’d realized an important detail. “We’re just a job to you, probably barely your friends.”

Grian opened and closed his mouth over and over again. The swirling in his gut was climbing up his throat, bringing with it a new wave of almost-dizziness. Clearly, he was more than a little overwhelmed to suddenly be called a friend to the Bamboozlers. “What are you talking about, Timmy? We’re… friends.”

“Mhm, sure. You hesitated, though,” Jimmy pointed out. “Means you take longer to reach conclusions about us. Which, for a civilian, makes sense, but it also, y’know, explains quite a lot. That’s all I’m saying, dude.”

The blond man raised his brows at Grian, and the vet sputtered, beyond confused. He was relatively sure his ability to understand social cues was being judged, and yet it sounded like an entirely different conversation at the same time. Jimmy wasn’t the best at getting his point across when he had one hip cocked to support the weight of his cat and a smug glint in his eyes.

“Oh, can it, Tim,” Grian eventually huffed. He rounded the desk again to check over some basic scheduling things.

“Fine, fine. Process this at your own speed,” Jimmy relented, shrugging. “He’ll take anything you give him, even if you don’t know what he’s trying to communicate.”

“Either tell me straight to my face, or stop with your nonsense,” the vet shot back. “I don’t have time for puzzles.”

“If I said anything more, I’d be stuffed and hung from the ceiling like a really gangly chandelier,” Jimmy replied, which was a horrible mental picture that worked to sufficiently scare Grian away from pursuing their topic. “Anyway, can you check Norman for worms?”

“Yeah, yeah, I can,” Grian muttered. “Room two is open right now, and the other staff are busy with their chores, so they shouldn’t ask questions. Come on.”

“Wait, don’t I need to fill out paperwork? For your files?”

“No, Tim,” Grian scoffed. “I still value my life, thank you.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t kill us to fill out one sheet,” Jimmy told him. “We do tons of paperwork when we go anywhere else that requires it, and no one there has to die.”

“Yeah, but they just think you’re regular civilians, so it doesn’t matter if you’re in their database.” Grian gathered up his stuff and started towards the exam room, trusting Jimmy to trail behind him. “I bet you don’t even wear masks to those appointments.”

“Why would we? They don’t know anything about us,” Jimmy said, doing exactly as expected. “Actually, Scar only just made us start carrying these fabric ones around with us, since that day he ran into you in public by accident. Before that, we didn’t have to worry about some random civilian spoiling our identity.”

They ducked into a small room with an exam table in the center and a couple of cabinets and a sink off to one side. There were chairs too, though Grian wouldn’t take long enough for those to be necessary. “Why would I be the only person that would recognize you guys? Wouldn’t the heroes also be able to spot you while they’re out and

about?”

“Technically, yes, but it’s less likely. You’ve seen us up close for hours at a time,” Jimmy explained. “They see us in fights only, and those don’t usually last for long if we can help it. It doesn’t give them time to get to know our mannerisms. Like how you could tell it was me just now, despite never having heard my voice before. A hero couldn’t do that.”

“Really? I mean, I guess that makes sense.” The vet showed him where to set the carrier down, and they began the process of coaxing Norman out onto the table. “Still, aren’t there pictures and stuff out there? Couldn’t they memorize what the upper half of your face looks like?”

Luckily, the little guy was fairly friendly. The furball emerged, and sat politely while Grian did a basic examination of his physical state. Norman was healthy – a good weight, with an alertness in his eyes that was pleasing to see.

“Pictures don’t do as much as the heroes would need them to. Tons of people are born with similar enough features that it’s hard to distinguish,” Jimmy said. “Besides, the bottom halves of our faces are too exquisite for anyone to notice the top halves when we’re out on the town.”

“You three are all the same,” Grian grumbled, remembering the similar way Scar had bragged about the Bamboozlers’ beauty during one of their first meetings. He’d brushed it off back then, but hearing it again now, he couldn’t help wondering how true the statement was. Grian’s chest gave yet another lurch, so he forced himself to focus on his job.

Figuring Jimmy wouldn’t have thought to collect a stool sample

before coming, he went ahead and raised the cat's tail and checked underneath. Grian furrowed his brows as he spotted something amiss — little white bits, like grains of rice. He'd seen them hundreds of times in the past.

"Tapeworms," Grian said. "We can collect a stool sample too if you'd like, but I already know the result."

"You're certain?"

Grian nodded.

Jimmy straightened. "Is that, like, bad?"

"Not if it's treated properly," Grian reassured him. "I'll prescribe him some medication. Won't take long to clear up."

"Oh, okay," Jimmy sighed, relaxing. "Thanks, Grian."

They chatted for a bit longer about the necessary steps, how to prevent this in the future, and whether or not his other cat would have to worry about getting worms as well. The vet found it easy to get lost in his job — in these discussions he had every day. It was normal, routine. Compared to the subtle twisting of his insides throughout the day, which was slowly driving him insane, he appreciated the familiarity.

Eventually, it came time for Grian to bid him farewell. There were no other clients or staff waiting for them in the lobby, so they were safe to talk openly. No one would know that he'd completed a whole examination for a Bamboozler when they weren't looking. The idea of

getting away with something like that was oddly thrilling.

In all honesty, he'd forgotten his promise to make Jimmy pay full-price. So, he was a little shocked when he was offered a goodbye handshake, and several bills were slipped into his palm.

"Four hundred should cover it, right?" Jimmy shot him a smile via his crinkled eyes, and then ducked out the door. "Bye, Grian!"

"Should cover it?" Grian blinked. "This is *way* more than I would've charged."

But his companion was already gone. He pursed his lips, watching through the glass as Jimmy's form retreated further down the sidewalks.

"Wait, don't go," he muttered under his breath, words barely audible. "You overpaid. Come back."

Jimmy, predictably, did not acknowledge him or come back. It was unlikely such a quiet exclamation had even reached him.

"Oh no, he can't hear me! That sucks." Grian pocketed the money, not feeling nearly as guilty as he probably should have. "Nothing I can do now."

He returned to his tasks, a whole shift left to complete. Skizz waved him over, and he promptly forgot about the tightness in his heart.

A scream, blood-curdling and overflowing with the fear of death echoed through the small room. It came to a deafening end, and then restarted once more, like a broken record of unbearable pain.

Grian sighed, his focus interrupted by the sound. “Do you *mind?”*

“C’mon, Grian! Lighten up,” Eclipse snorted from where she was perched at the end of the bed. “It’s *funny*. You’ve seen the clip, right?”

Grian looked up from the makeshift cast he’d only just finished putting on Jimmy’s ring finger. It wasn’t his best work, but having pulled it together from what he could find at the clinic after the text telling him about the situation, it could’ve been a lot worse.

The clip in question was the source of the screaming being emitted from Eclipse’s phone. It showed the blurry drone footage of their most recent heist at a warehouse on the edge of town, said to be holding quite a few valuable artifacts from a museum. There was nothing intense or impressive about that footage, though. Just pure stupidity.

In the video, Jimmy was pictured slipping cartoonishly off a crate, limbs flailing out around him, and eventually, his whole body weight landing hard atop his hand on the concrete ground. The result was the shrill screech now circulating through the entire city’s social media feed.

Honestly, the cause of the injury was so unbelievably stupid that Grian couldn’t even be fully mad that he was doing work on his day off from the clinic. He’d actually needed to take a minute to calm down from his fits of laughter when he’d been filled in on the situation at hand. A broken bone was bad, but it was such a *Jimmy* way for the whole ordeal to go down that he struggled to think of it as

anything beyond pure comedy.

No hero was involved, no massive fight, no crazy clash with a weapon had brought this upon him. It was just his own clumsiness and gravity.

Perhaps the only genuinely frustrating part of it all was the fact that it was a widely-known injury, meaning the city's hospitals would collectively be keeping an eye out for patients coming in to get broken hands or fingers treated over the course of the next few days.

The city always sent out alerts to the local hospitals whenever they were aware that a villain had sustained an injury that might be identifiable. Grian hadn't known that when starting this little hobby of his, but it was officially divulged to him not long ago — explaining why he remained as their primary medical aide, even for problems that should've been taken to a human physician.

"Of course, I've seen it," Grian replied, but he let Eclipse shove the phone in his direction once more. Jimmy made a noise of complaint, which was quickly covered by that same familiar shrieking. The vet smiled at the goofy way the video version of Jimmy collapsed, falling after being a bit too cocky about his ability to hold something heavy. A brilliant consequence. "You're kind of dumb, Tim."

"Hey!" Jimmy scoffed, crossing his arms. "It really hurt, you know! Not funny!"

"Yes, breaking one singular finger and screaming like you were being stabbed repeatedly is not funny in the slightest," a new voice said, the door opening behind them. "I bet five hundred dollars that if I got the same injury, I wouldn't scream at all."

“That’s hardly fair. Your pain tolerance is inhuman, Scar,” Grian said, rolling his eyes. He glanced back at the other man. “But I’ll take that bet, so long as I’m the one that gets to break your finger.”

“If that’s what you want, Doctor,” Scar laughed from behind the cotton mask adorning his face. He was dressed in casual attire – a white shirt that hugged his frame just right, and some regular jeans. Grian was still getting used to seeing him like that, but it was hardly his biggest adjustment as of late.

For the last three visits Grian had with the trio, whether in their base or elsewhere, they’d taken to wearing these types of medical masks instead of their usual gas masks. Two of the three had been heard on various occasions, but Eclipse was a new addition to that mix, and it was freaking his mind out. Luckily, she was too preoccupied with the video to speak often.

Scar’s voice was, as always, an anchor of familiarity, something he knew by heart already. It was nice, honestly, to hear it so often recently without the robotic twinge. He preferred this sound much better — the rumble of it in his chest, the way it pitched from high to low, the extravagant tone it took on when he was being dramatic. Grian loved it.

His stomach flipped, threatening to knock him over and steal the breath from his lungs. The vet was barely able to shock himself out of his daze before he could be consumed by heat with a firm pinch to his own arm.

He cleared his throat, averting his eyes from the other man’s face. Staring wasn’t polite, especially not with his new tendency of going a little red every time he did it.

He *still* hadn’t found the root of that problem, but it was especially

prevalent around the Bamboozlers. The vet just couldn't think of a single emotion that made sense with the scenario. A civilian surrounded by villains capable of ruining his life should have a pretty clear set of options laid out for him ahead of time.

Yet, none of the guesses he'd explored quite suited this miraculous sensation, and he was running low on options. It wasn't fear, like he'd originally hypothesized, nor was it paranoia, sadness, nausea, anger, irritation, or anything of the sort. Nervousness was the closest he'd gotten, actually. But it also made very little logical sense. Why would he feel nervous around someone like Scar, who put in extra effort to keep him as comfortable as possible?

Grian gave one thorough smack to his chest, willing his heart to stop skipping beats at inconvenient times, and turned his attention back to Jimmy. The cast kept his finger straight, taped to the one beside it, as was the usual procedure. It'd work fairly well for the time being, but the vet would keep an eye out in case things went south. If Jimmy's finger seemed to be healing wrong, he'd take him to the hospital.

He wasn't worried, though. Breaks were similar enough between humans and animals. He double-checked his handiwork, then decided it was good enough.

"Alright, Tim," Grian started. "You know the rules of a break, I'm sure. I'll check up on it constantly, but until I say it's fully healed, don't do anything to push yourself. No pick-pocketing or punching or taking the cast off without my permission. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Jimmy replied, giving him a mock salute. "I'll only pick-pocket a little bit."

"Good luck," Eclipse said, tone rife with amusement. Her voice was a smooth thing, almost melodic without the distortion of her modulator

or the rasp of an oxygen mask. “Invisible or not, no one’s gonna be able to miss you stealing from them with that bulky thing on your hand.”

“Oh yeah?”

Jimmy crossed his arms over his chest, and then, in the blink of an eye, disappeared. Grian blinked, staring at the spot on the bed where he had been. The mattress remained weighed down as if someone were seated there, but not even a sliver of the man could be seen. It decompressed a second later, indicating Jimmy standing, and eliminating the last clue as to where the guy might be.

Grian glanced at his surroundings, trying to decipher what was happening. Jimmy’s room wasn’t particularly remarkable.

Compared to Eclipse’s bright pink aesthetic, and Scar’s homely vibes, Jimmy seemed like a regular bachelor without much passion for decorating. His bedsheets were plaid, matching his pillows, there was a regular wooden desk against one wall, some lamps in each corner of the room, a plush chair, a cowboy hat hung up like it was on display, and not much else.

Despite his observations, he still wasn’t able to narrow down Jimmy’s location. He couldn’t hear steps, heavy breaths, the ruffle of clothes, or anything of the sort. It was unnerving, actually, to lose track of someone otherwise known for their noisy presence.

Grian glanced at Scar and Eclipse, intending on gauging their reactions, but both of them had let their eyes fall shut. He supposed they were listening. Though, for what he wasn’t sure. Grian couldn’t hear a thing.

Suddenly, Eclipse reached out, grabbing onto something and twisting.

"Ow, ow, let go!" Jimmy's voice screeched. He became visible with the contact, the room's light distorting to bring him back into view. Eclipse had latched onto the man's wrist with impressive precision. "Geez, alright, let me at least get to the pick-pocketing attempt before you snatch me out of thin air!"

Eclipse released him and rolled her eyes. Jimmy shimmered out of visibility once more. Not a second later, Grian felt something in his back pocket.

"Timmy," he spat. "Get your hand off my wallet this instant!"

The sensation fell away, replaced with a disgruntled grumbling somewhere behind him. "Aw, man," Jimmy said, fading into view. "That's the first time Grian's ever caught me."

Grian's jaw dropped open.

Scar beat him to the punch. "The *first* time?"

He looked just as baffled as Grian felt.

"Chill, dude! Just took small bills, nothing he'd notice!" Jimmy raised his arms defensively, a nervous smile on his face as his gaze bounced between his teammate and the vet. "Right, G? You never noticed?"

"You decided to *steal,"* Scar hissed. "From the *one* civilian who freely

helps us with problems we can't solve ourselves?"

"It's fine, Scar," Grian sighed. "No, Tim, I didn't notice."

It was the truth, at least. No matter what amount had been stolen from his wallet, Grian didn't tend to carry much money around with him, so he knew it couldn't be anything genuinely devastating.

Besides, Jimmy's four hundred bucks – with the assistance of his most recent paycheck – kept his bank account very warm for the past two weeks. He'd used it to purchase an unhealthy amount of takeout. It felt good.

"Right. Go easy on him, Scar," Eclipse chimed. "It's not like he's taking enough to cancel out the cash we've all seen you smuggling *into* Grian's wallet."

"You," Grian started, whirling around to face the other man. *"What?"*

This was the first he was hearing of such things. Probably for good reason, too.

They had talked about this after the incident with the watch. He allowed the gift to be a rare exception, but anything more was against his wishes. Grian didn't want dirty money, didn't want to be paid for his services, and he especially didn't want to receive that sort of thing after explicitly making it clear that he *didn't want it.*

Scar shrunk back as Grian stepped closer, jamming a pointer finger into his chest. "You…"

“Oh, now Scar’s in trouble,” Jimmy snickered. “Good thinking, Eclipse.”

“Yeah, good thinking, Eclipse,” Scar muttered, pale. His hands felt around blindly behind him, obviously searching for an escape. Unfortunately for Grian, he found one in the form of the doorknob. “You know what? I’m just realizing that I left something in the oven. Let me go take care of that.”

“Don’t you dare–!”

Grian started forward, reaching out like he was going to grab the other, but he was forced to stop by a sudden red glow. The thick sensation of Scar’s powers surrounded his arms, slowing them nearly to a stop. Green eyes shot him a wink, and then he was gone.

Instantly, once the door shut, the glow faded, and momentum returned. Grian stumbled forward, just barely stopping himself from hitting his head on the wall. Vengeance thwarted, he spun on his heels, turning to his only other options.

“I need one of you to go make him regret not listening to me,” he told Eclipse and Jimmy. “Drop an ice cube down the back of his shirt or something.”

Jimmy crossed his arms over his chest. “What would we get in exchange?”

“Never mind that! Grian’s giving us an excuse to mess with Scar,” Eclipse exclaimed, jumping to her feet and throwing her phone back onto Jimmy’s bed. She rushed to the door, almost knocking the vet

over in the process of yanking it open. “I’m *not* passing it up.”

“Hey, wait,” Jimmy stammered. He also got to his feet, hurrying after her. “Wait for me!”

Grian was left alone in Jimmy’s room suddenly, all three Bamboozlers elsewhere. He took the moment to dig through his wallet, grumbling to himself all the while. It wasn’t hard to figure out what didn’t belong there, given his aforementioned personal philosophy of never carrying around a certain amount at a time.

The excess was dropped on Jimmy’s desk. It was accompanied by a sticky note containing a list of things he could buy for the future, when they’d inevitably have to do minor amounts of physical therapy to get his finger back to working order. Grian didn’t know the most about stuff like this, but he had time to learn the basics before the other was healed enough to need it.

Distantly, there was a screaming from down the hallway. He was about to leave the room to check on the three when there came several dinging sounds. Grian frowned, glancing towards where Eclipse had dropped her phone.

The screen was on, and it looked as though a text message had come through. Not thinking much of it, Grian picked up the phone, intending on carrying it to its owner. He hadn’t really thought about what might accidentally be waiting on the screen for him when he got there.

Car Guy

Hey Lizzie! We still on for today?

Car Guy

Slayer's giving me some trouble, so I might be running a little late, but I'll be there!

Car Guy

Unless we're not on for today… haha… in which case… I won't be there! Love you and all that!

Grian frowned at the assortment of messages. His eyes scanned them over and over again, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. He shouldn't have looked at all — some muted part of his brain repeated this over and over again — but now, he'd seen something he absolutely shouldn't have.

"Oh, great," he muttered, wincing. It *would* be just his luck that something as classified as a villain's name would be waiting out in the open for him to find. Grian forced himself to look away, clearing his throat. The world was distant around him, made unimportant by the new information he'd just learned. He straightened, clearing his throat. "Okay, just play it cool. Play it cool. She doesn't have to know."

She doesn't have to know how horribly her personal space was just invaded, the nasty little voice in his head added, guilt welling in his throat. *Play it cool.*

He stepped out into the hall, where the sound of voices had gotten significantly louder. The phone weighed heavily in his hands, buzzing again as that contact obviously sent another message. He forced a neutral expression, but his knees shook as he rounded the corner into the main area.

It wasn't hard to find the Bamboozlers once he was there. They were

all crowded around the middle of the room. Jimmy had jumped on Scar's back, and was screeching as the other man was attempting to throw him off. Eclipse — not Lizzie, just Eclipse, because he wasn't supposed to know that yet — had wrapped herself around one of Scar's legs in an attempt to trip him. They made a ridiculous picture, one that certainly would've brought a smile to his face if he weren't so mortified.

"Um, Eclipse," Grian spoke up, willing the shaking in his voice to lessen. All three of them froze, the whole of the room's attention shifting in his direction. He held out the phone, screen down. "I think… someone's texting you."

Eclipse's brows furrowed. She untangled herself from the others and trotted over to him.

Grian swallowed hard as she took the phone — bad move. She was keen as ever, gaze catching the involuntary tell instantly. Her eyes narrowed. "You okay, Grian?"

"Yeah," Grian lied. He could feel himself paling, barely restraining his outward fear. Guilt gnawed at his chest, churned in his gut, and shot pangs of cold terror through him. He'd screwed up, and now, Eclipse was looking at him with a scarily calculating awareness.

His heart jumped into his chest as she flipped over her phone and the screen came on, revealing the recently sent messages. He watched her read them, watched her realize what had happened, watched her look back up at him. Her blue eyes hardened, not a shred of doubt hidden within them.

"Grian," Eclipse whispered. "You saw these, didn't you?"

Grian swallowed again, forcing a tight smile. He couldn't make himself form the words, so he settled for a smaller admittance. "Maybe? Who… Um, who is that guy? Do you, uh, have a date later or something?"

"A date?" Both Scar and Jimmy's attention had been caught by that. They stopped their fighting to scramble over to the two of them. Eclipse's attention did not stray away from Grian for a single second, not even to close her phone or hide the screen from her teammates. The damage was done the second their heads peered over her shoulder.

Scar spoke up first, "Car Guy? Who's Car Guy?"

"Love you?" Jimmy's jaw dropped. "Why's there a guy saying that he loves you in your messages?"

"Wait a minute," Scar trailed off, growing quiet and confusion turning into something else. "Is that your… real name?"

"Grian," Eclipse gritted out, lips pulling up into a sneer. "I'm going to *kill* you."

Grian knew she wasn't joking.

He stumbled back a few steps and she lunged forward. Scar was faster, catching her arm and yanking her back. Jimmy attempted to grab her too, but she elbowed him in the gut, causing him to double over. Eclipse was genuinely fighting against them, genuinely straining to get away, genuinely trying to kill him.

Grian didn't know what to do, didn't know where he could run, didn't know if he *could* run even if he did. His legs were shaking too hard, fear catapulting through his veins. Rooted to the floor, all he could do was hope that Scar's hold on her was enough.

It was not.

Eclipse changed her stance.

Scar saw it before Grian did, squeezing tighter, but nothing was able to stop her once she'd made up her mind. The three in the room could only look on in horror as shadows encapsulated her body, her eyes changing from blue to an inky black. Suddenly, without warning, it was exploding outwards. Grian saw a wave of black raging towards him, and then, he saw nothing at all.

It hit with a force that sent him stumbling back, tripping over his own shoes, and falling to the ground. Grian thought he'd closed his eyes in the commotion, but when he went to open them, he found that they already were. He tried to look down at his hands, but he couldn't find them. It made his mind spin, and nausea well up in his gut. Grian tried again and again, blinking rapidly, but his eyes wouldn't open, his vision wouldn't clear.

Every ounce of his sight was lost, not a drop of light or shape remaining. The expanse of nothingness stretching out before him wasn't due to shut eyelids or a blindfold or some other cause. He was actually, genuinely blind.

In a matter of moments, he'd come to understand why other civilians caught within this shadowy veil often sought psychological help. It was like losing a piece of himself, and all over some stupid text message.

The vet heard a grunt a little distance away, then hurried footsteps.

"Grian!" Scar sounded winded, not too far off, but not within range either. Grian didn't know where he was, how much he'd moved, what the rest of the room looked like. "Lizzie, leave him alone!"

A hand latched onto the front of his shirt, and he was yanked up. He stumbled as he was dragged, everything a blur, his whole body disoriented. Finally, he was shoved forward. His knee bumped into a wooden post, sending pain rocketing up his body. There was a slamming noise behind him, followed by the click of a lock, and the metallic *shing* of something being unsheathed.

"What did you see?"

Eclipse was close, maybe a foot or two away — or maybe not? Grian couldn't get a read on the room's depth, or the distance between them at all. He was lost like this.

Figuring it best not to leave an already-angered villain hanging, he forced himself to choke out a small, "What… do you mean?"

He felt something cold against his throat. Sight wasn't necessary to deduce exactly what that was. Eclipse's voice was low and growling as she repeated, "What did you see, Grian?"

"Everything," Grian admitted. He couldn't even begin to form a lie. It wouldn't be fair to her to try, anyway. It was Eclipse's classified information that he'd accidentally seen, and to pretend like he hadn't disrespected her that way would be cruel. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to."

There was a loud sigh, and the tip of her spear retreated. Grian felt a hand on his shoulder, and then a palm covered his eyes. “Release.”

Instantly, Grian was blinded by an onslaught of lights. He hissed, scrambling to rub at his eyes. Color and brightness and sensation returned to him at a shockingly fast rate, burning his brain.

“Ow, man,” Grian complained. “Were you always able to do that on command?”

“Only sometimes. It eats up a lot of energy, so I don’t do it often,” Eclipse replied.

When Grian’s surprise had subsided enough for him to make out his surroundings, he realized they were in her bedroom. She was leaning against the door, spinning her spear – which had been retracted into its knife form – between her fingers. Though she looked relaxed and wasn’t poised to slit his throat anymore, the vet didn’t lower his guard.

Eclipse was, after all, still blocking the only exit.

Judging by the sounds of muffled curses and furniture scuffing, he guessed the other two would be blind for a while longer, unable to come to his aid. He was stuck in the room with a villain he’d wronged and no guarantee he would make it out alive.

“I can’t believe you,” Eclipse muttered, scowling. Her eyes, which were now used to glare holes into his head, had returned to their usual blue color. “What a stupid way to have my identity exposed. I’d been hoping to last significantly longer than those other two idiots.”

Grian smiled nervously. “My bad.”

He remembered how shocked Jimmy had been to learn Scar had revealed his name so easily, but that was apparently nothing in comparison to Eclipse’s reaction. Scar told him later that she’d yelled at her teammates for hours about their inability to keep themselves safe. The only thing that had stopped her was being reminded that she was, actually, the one responsible for revealing Jimmy’s name.

“If you’d like, I can pretend I never saw anything,” Grian offered.

“Don’t bother. It’s too late,” she huffed. Eclipse pushed herself off the door and stepped forward. Begrudgingly, she extended a hand in his direction. “My name is Lizzie. Nice to meet you, or whatever.”

Grian stared at her open palm for several seconds, as if trying to deduce if she was going to use the handshake to pull him in and kill him, but eventually went through with it. Her grip was firm – too firm – almost as though she was attempting to break his fingers. Sucking in a breath, he chuckled, “Um, Lizzie?”

She didn’t seem to hear him, simply glaring down at their hands and squeezing tighter. Grian clenched his teeth to keep from appearing too distressed, but sirens were going off in his head. The only thing that cut through the room’s tense silence was the sound of a ding, like another text message had come in.

“Lizzie, your phone,” he choked out. “I think… Car Guy texted you again!”

Lizzie’s eyes went wide, and she released him with a gasp. Grian

panted for air, stretching his fingers to test if they were broken. Meanwhile, Lizzie fumbled for her phone. As soon as she'd pulled it out of her pocket, it began to ring. He saw that same contact name from earlier flash on the screen.

She became visibly worried, glancing between the phone and Grian. He shrugged and gestured for her to answer. Nodding, she picked up, and then resumed a rushed version of her previous nonchalant lean against the door. Clearing her throat, she said, "Hey."

A muffled voice replied to her, but Grian couldn't hear that part. Lizzie's furthering furrowed brows were his only clue. She straightened, reaching up to nervously fidget with her hair.

"No, babe," Lizzie hastily blurted. "No, I wasn't wanting to call off our…"

She stared at Grian, visibly uncomfortable.

"Our *date* at all," she finished. "I meant to answer you. Just like Slayer's messing with you, my Bamboozlers were distracting me."

Grian frowned.

Babe? Date? Slayer? Bamboozlers?

None of those words made sense in this already confusing context. The first two implied romantic interest, which was crazy in and of itself, because he was pretty sure her teammates would've told Grian if they knew she was seeing someone. It was the last two outstanding words that threw him off balance, though.

He'd been too preoccupied earlier to fully process all the text messages he'd read. Now that he had time to think about it though, he *did* vaguely remember seeing Slayer mentioned – capitalized and everything, like it was specifically referring to the hero. And just a second ago, she'd casually mentioned the Bamboozlers, as if the person on the other end knew very well that she was part of that group.

But that couldn't be the case, right? He had to have misheard her or misunderstood something, because if he was guessing correctly, then that meant Lizzie was dating someone who was associated with the heroes and knew about her status as a Bamboozler.

It clicked in his head.

The vet's jaw dropped. "You're dating *Furioso?"*

Lizzie whirled around to face him, eyes wide and brows raised. She practically tackled him in an attempt to shove a hand over his mouth. Notably, though, she wasn't denying it. He was exactly right.

While he absorbed this new discovery, Lizzie finished up her phone call. "Listen, babe, I have to go. Pick me up at my place tonight?"

There was a buzzing answer on the other end, and her face flushed.

"Right, love you too," she replied, tone almost sheepish. "Bye."

She hung up, and Grian felt the blade return to his neck. He gasped

through the hand that still covered his mouth. The vet expected to be threatened again, to have his every fear displayed before him, to be cursed by the woman until he crumpled into dust.

"You can't tell the others," she said instead, desperation bleeding out of her. Her eyes were wide, pleading, and he could feel her hand shaking. "You *can't.*"

Grian's brows furrowed, but he nodded. She released him, stepping back and falling onto her bed. Pink hair splayed out behind her, and an arm tossed over her eyes, she looked nothing like the terrifying villain that had dragged him into the room to begin with.

Unsure of how to begin, he chose to simply sit next to her and say, "They don't know?"

"No," she groaned. "I've been trying to find a way to tell them, but it's just… this isn't really a topic you can bring up at the drop of a hat, you know?"

Grian didn't know, but he could make some assumptions. A villain dating a hero was a scandal like no other. A few months prior, simply the idea of Furioso crushing on Lizzie was absurd to him. Dating was on an entirely different level from that.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

Lizzie shrugged. "A year."

Grian dug his nails into the mattress to keep from freaking out. He didn't think she needed that kind of energy at the moment. "Oh? A…

whole year?"

"In my defense," Lizzie sighed. She sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. "Six of those months were spent trying to figure out if a relationship like ours could even work. It also took me a while to realize he wasn't just doing this to get information out of me."

There was a glint to her eyes that Grian had never seen before, something soft and secretive. It was as if the mere mention of her partner made her happy. The vet had little experience with romance himself, but he knew this was what it was supposed to look like.

As unconventional, difficult, dangerous as a relationship between a hero and a villain was bound to be, the two were obviously getting through it together. He had no room to impose on them. Lizzie was content, no doubt having already considered all the downsides long before she'd ever met Grian. If she had her heart set on it, he knew she could achieve anything.

"You should tell Scar and Jimmy soon," Grian said. She glanced over at him, visibly unsure. "It'll only be worse to keep putting it off. Besides, those guys are both giant softies. I'm sure they'll understand that the heart wants what it wants."

Lizzie considered him carefully, mulling over his advice. "Yeah," she whispered finally. "Yeah, they probably will."

"I'm on your side, at least," Grian assured her. "But there's nothing to worry about. They care about you a lot."

A loud banging on the door startled both of them out of their moment.

“Lizzie!” Jimmy’s voice echoed through the base, fists falling hard against the wood. “Scar’s got an axe. Release Grian, or we’re breaking in ourselves!”

“Oh my God,” Grian groaned. He stood and stormed across the room, irritated. The door was thrown open to reveal Jimmy, with his hand still raised to knock, and Scar a few paces behind him with an axe held above his head. “You’re both ridiculous. Lower that this instant!”

Scar did as he was told, hiding the weapon behind his back. “Doctor! You’re alright!”

“Of course he’s alright,” Lizzie declared, joining him at the threshold to glare at her teammates. “We were just having an… *enlightening* conversation. I was never actually going to kill him.”

“Good,” Jimmy chirped, clapping his hands together. “Now that this whole thing’s cleared up… Who’s the guy on your phone, Liz?”

Lizzie’s brow twitched. She shot a look at Grian, worried and panicking. He patted her back, and stepped over to the man with the axe. “I should get going. You can have these deeply personal conversations without me. Come on, Scar.”

Scar nodded, abandoning the weapon to escort Grian out the usual way. The vet donned his blindfold, and allowed himself to be directed up and out to the car. It was a little disconcerting to be unable to see again, but he was kept calm by the knowledge that this was only temporary, just a cloth over his eyes and nothing more.

The drive was mostly silent. They were nearing the end of it when his

companion piped up. “Sorry that Lizzie scared you today.”

“It’s alright,” Grian said. “I deserved it for prying.”

He was, for the most part, already over the terror. The Bamboozlers rarely scared him these days, and it wasn’t often his life actually felt like it was at risk. He bounced back a lot faster when it did occasionally occur. Maybe that should’ve been concerning, but he had quite a bit more on his mind.

The car pulled over, meaning they’d arrived, but Grian didn’t pull the blindfold off yet. “Hey, Scar?”

Scar hummed in acknowledgement. Grian blindly reached out and took him by the hand, squeezing it.

“Promise me that you’ll listen to everything Lizzie has to say to you when you get back,” he said. “It’s important to her that you and Jimmy understand.”

There were a few beats of silence, and then Scar laughed slightly. “Well, if you asked it of me, Doctor, then I’ll be sure to do that.”

His hand was brought up, and a chaste kiss was pressed to his knuckles.

Grian flushed, that same unfamiliar sensation of heat and buzzing returning to his gut. He could feel the imprint of Scar’s lips against his skin for ages after his hand was released. The world became such an immediate daze that he didn’t even realize he’d gotten out of the car until all that was left of it was its retreating tail lights.

The vet forced himself to focus on walking the rest of the way home, putting the odd sensation behind him. Maybe he'd figure out what this meant for him eventually, but for now, he couldn't wrap his head around it. There was still time. No reason to rush.

The television buzzed with melancholic music as the expected third-act breakup began in Grian's mindless movie.

A trashy script combined with a cacophony of clichés made for a rather boring display. Misunderstandings always got resolved quickly enough that he didn't understand why they bothered including them in the plot, and the two characters that actually had chemistry didn't even end up together.

He could already tell that this movie wouldn't occupy his thoughts for a single moment once it was done. It wasn't even worth leaving a scathing online review for it, as he was wont to do on occasion.

He'd put it on out of curiosity, and stayed because he had nothing better to do. The evening air was chilly, so walking around was out of the question, and Mumbo was on shift, meaning plans weren't possible either. Grian had already gone through his usual list of activities to do when alone for the day, but it was rare he actually ended up resorting to terrible movies.

His shift at the clinic wasn't bad that morning. He'd worked early hours, and after taking a nap once he got home, Grian made food, played with his cats, read up on new medical journals, watched the latest episodes of a show he was binging, and then fell into silence.

Embarrassingly, without a fight on the news or the promise of his favorite trio paying him a visit, he was bored. Were it not for the nap taken earlier, he would've just called it and gone to bed, but the hours ticked into midnight and he still wasn't tired.

The movie was supposed to fix that. Maybe he couldn't get genuine enjoyment out of it, but Grian had hoped the sheer stupidity of its content would be a little funny. Still, as it echoed the same oversaturated plot made a million times before, he found that it didn't quite hit the spot.

So, when his phone vibrated on the coffee table beside him, he nearly threw out his back trying to jump to his feet. The screen lit up with a text message from a contact that made his heart thump against his ribs and his stomach twist.

Your Favorite Guy 💍

Hey, G! Are you busy? I might need help with something.

Your Favorite Guy 💍

Might be a big ask though.

Grian didn't hesitate to send his response.

Grian

I'm free! What can I do?

The other man took a minute to get back to him. In that time, Grian grew anxious. He could already tell by the tone of the message that it had something to do with Scar's work as a villain. It didn't explicitly

describe an injury though, as his texts regarding that measure usually aimed to do, so what exactly this could be about was up in the air.

To ease some of his concerns, he switched channels over to the news. Unsurprisingly, there was a report of villainous activity. However, the specific situation caught his attention.

“A bank robbery,” Grian whispered, scanning the words that ran along the bottom of the screen. “My old bank… They finally did it.”

After weeks of misdirection through the medium of various little other crimes, the Bamboozlers had, at last, pulled off their big heist. Judging by the worried look on the reporter’s face, it’d gone off exactly as planned too. Grian listened intently for several minutes, growing more and more excited as he learned new details.

Allegedly, if the police were to be believed, the vault containing the passcodes and account information of one of the city’s richest men had been infiltrated in the dead of night. A currently unknown amount of cash had been stolen alongside the USB drive containing those important records. Should the heroes fail to apprehend the criminals soon, it was set to be one of the most infamous bank robberies the city had ever seen.

And, to make things that much more interesting, the Bamboozlers apparently were only barely spotted that evening. If not for an emergency call made by a shop owner closing up across the street from the bank calling in some suspicious activity, the trio would’ve escaped without so much as a whisper to indicate their presence.

They’d broken in precisely above where the vault was hidden in the floor, and cut into the metal from the top, making it a scarily quick endeavor. Their positioning was so precise that the police were apparently planning to investigate the employees, claiming it could be

an inside job.

Without really thinking, Grian's chest swelled with an unbelievable sense of pride. It made him hesitate, reevaluate. This was strange. Cheering for a team of villains to succeed was strange. He should've been terrified, appalled, concerned for the state of the city's security, as every other civilian surely was at that moment.

Instead, however, all he could feel was extreme joy — a jittery sensation, like the kind that might take over one's body after their favorite sports team wins a championship game. He'd watched them map this night out, accounting for each second of time, and picked up details of their plan throughout. Grian now knew exactly how much effort went into a heist at this level of perfection, and he was completely enthralled.

His excitement would've continued further, but a sudden ringing jolted him into the present. To his surprise, Scar was calling him. He picked up as fast as he could. "Hello?"

"Hey, Doctor. Sorry for calling without warning," Scar started. Immediately, Grian noted how his modulator wasn't on. He was speaking in his civilian voice. *"Just thought it'd be easier to explain out loud."*

"Right, that's fine," Grian replied. "What's going on, man? Great job on the heist, by the way. I saw the news."

"Oh? Are they saying good things about us? That's perfect," Scar said, sounding relieved. *"Means Jimmy and Lizzie haven't been caught."*

"Caught?" Grian frowned. "What do you mean? Aren't you with them?"

“No, we got separated. Listen, G, there’s a bit of a problem,” Scar continued, sucking in a sharp breath. *“The Agency has deployed every single hero in the city to try and find us. They’re one step short of putting the entire place on lockdown to make it easier to corner us. The billionaire we stole from tonight apparently had some tight connections.”*

“What? Really?” Grian stood up, worry building in his gut. “Is there a chance you’ll be caught?”

Scar let out a nervous laugh, and a second of silence passed. It served only to worsen the vet’s mood.

“What can I do, Scar?”

“Well, uh, I was wondering if I could borrow some clothes? Civilian clothes, specifically,” the other man replied sheepishly. *“And then, I was also wondering if maybe you could… bring them to me?”*

Grian paused.

It sounded like Scar wanted to escape from the heroes by disguising himself as a civilian. That was fine on its own, not that big of an ask, but he could see why the guy might be nervous requesting Grian specifically bring them to him.

An innocent person seeking out a villain currently on the run from every hero in the city was the fastest way to get implicated in a crime. If caught, Grian could be thrown in jail for months, and lose his job.

But, if caught, Scar would never see the outside of a prison cell again. They'd make sure of that. Ringmaster and his Bamboozlers were an undeniable threat. The city would not risk them escaping once in custody.

And that thought scared Grian even more than being implicated.

Without another word, he stood and began searching through his closet. Luckily for Scar, Grian had a phase during which he was a frequent thrifter, so the sizing and style of his clothing varied heavily. He found a large t-shirt with some lame movie quote plastered on his front, and a pair of too-big jeans he'd intended to cut up and remake into something new. It'd fit the other man fairly well, if he had to guess.

He also added a medical mask to the mix just in case. Once his packing was complete, he told the man on the other end of the phone, and Scar gave him another suggestion – particularly, he asked Grian to change into his scrubs, just in case his presence at that hour of night was cause for concern to those patrolling. After that was done, he relayed his location.

"You know that park a few blocks away from your apartment? I'm there," Scar specified. When Grian confirmed he knew of the place, he continued, *"I've locked myself in the public bathroom. No one saw me enter, but I don't think it'll be long until they decide to check here. Knock four times on the door, and I'll let you in."*

Grian agreed, and Scar hung up.

The vet threw on a jacket to keep out the cold air, leaving his apartment in a rush. He was immediately struck by how empty the streets were. It was late at night, of course, but his apartment wasn't exactly in the middle of nowhere. There were typically at least one or

two cars passing by, and civilians on the street. However, as Grian walked, he saw limited signs of life.

Scar wasn't lying when he said they were getting ready to shut the city down. Though his neighborhood probably wasn't close enough to the crime scene to get an official alert advising him to stay inside, he suspected many were taking those precautions anyway. It'd make his presence even more obvious to the thrall of patrolling heroes. His bag weighed heavier and heavier upon his shoulders.

Luckily, he got to the park without incident. It was only once he'd entered the slew of trees and grassy knolls that Grian caught sight of something he didn't like.

Someone, actually.

In the distance, on one of the rooftops that overlooked the park, he spotted a figure. They were draped in flowing clothing that was difficult to make out, and had their back to Grian, but it wasn't hard to tell that the individual was a hero. Encountering them this close to his goal had the potential to ruin everything.

Grian picked up the pace, the public bathroom in sight. It was a small building — the kind of place that might have a concession stand during the daylight hours, and had two bathrooms around the back. He hurried to find the door, knocking four times as instructed.

The vet had expected to simply hand the bag of clothes off and be done. He was *not* anticipating Scar pulling him inside and pressing him against the wall. Grian would've shrieked with surprise if not for the hand that quickly slapped itself over his mouth.

He came face to face with his friend, who hovered mere inches away,

eyes wide with crazed fear. Grian could smell his cologne, and feel the rapid fire beating of his pulse where their chests touched. The proximity stole his breath, his fight, his fear all at once. He could only see, hear, care about Scar directly in front of him.

Grian raised a hand, gently tapping at his friend's arm.

Scar seemed to register the situation, and pulled away, releasing the vet.

"Shoot! Sorry," he gasped, vocal modulator fluctuating. "I couldn't remember if I told you four knocks or five, and I kinda lost count when you started, so I thought I'd take my chances—"

"Scar," Grian interrupted, a small smile on his face. "It's fine. I get it."

It was, to be clear, a bit of a foolish mistake on Scar's part. Giving set instructions and then forgetting them moments later was the opposite of what a person in his situation was supposed to be doing. But honestly, he couldn't hold something like that against the guy.

Scar looked frazzled. He was almost closer to a spooked wild animal than a human. His hair was a mess, pupils blown wide, face flushed, and his chest heaving. No doubt the circumstances had him on edge. His flawless plan had been disrupted, and now an entire city's worth of heroes were hunting down him and his friends. One slip up could send all three of them to jail. Little details were bound to be forgotten in such a chaotic mental state.

Grian would just have to fill in for the other man's temporary loss of common sense himself. He could do that.

The vet went ahead and gestured for Scar to lean up against the wall. Once he was steadied, Grian locked the main door to the bathroom, then began digging out the clothes he'd brought. The handful of medical supplies stopped him. He glanced up at the other man, surveying quickly for visible damage. "Are you hurt at all?"

"Um, no," Scar replied. "No, I don't think so."

True to his word, his friend didn't look wounded. His Ringmaster costume was unharmed, no scratches or rips to be seen, and his skin was unblemished, aside from the old healed wounds that usually decorated his body.

On a similar note, Grian didn't hear any wheezing in his speech or stuttering in his breath that could indicate internal injuries to the ribs. Just to be sure, the vet leaned forward a little, surveying his pupils for signs of a concussion. Scar did him the favor of remaining perfectly still while he swayed closer.

Ultimately, though, there was nothing to be found. Obviously, if he'd fought anyone during his escape they hadn't been able to land a significant blow.

"Alright, here," Grian said, leaning back and passing over the clothes. "Hurry and change. It won't be long before the heroes come around."

The bathroom was one of two single-stalled rooms in the little building where they were sheltering, so Grian had to turn to give Scar privacy. He counted the tiles on the wall as he listened to the rustling of fabric. Ringmaster's costume had a lot of little facets, meaning it was no quick process.

"So," he started, keeping his mind away from the precarious situation.

“You brought your phone with you on your mission today, right? I thought you didn’t typically do that.”

“Hm? Oh, no,” Scar said, and his vocal modulator wasn’t there to distort the sound. “I just added your phone number as a contact on my watch. I can call you or use voice commands to send short texts with it. It’s safer than carrying a phone.”

“Ah, I see,” Grian hummed, intrigued. He hadn’t really thought to ask about the Bamboozlers’ communications before. Something warm opened up in his chest at the thought of being included in that. “I’m your emergency contact, then?”

Scar did him the honor of laughing a bit. The lovely noise made the bathroom feel brighter for its brief duration. Grian wished he would do it again, and again, and again. It reverberated in his heart, softening his edges. Despite the reality of danger lurking just beyond the building’s dingy walls, he found himself completely at ease with Scar nearby.

“Grian?”

“Yeah?” Grian perked up, realizing the rustling had stopped. “Are you done?”

“Um, yes, for the most part. There’s just… a tiny problem,” Scar replied, and Grian’s heart dropped. Before he could inquire further, though, Scar cleared his throat and said, “You can turn around now, I guess.”

The vet’s mind spun with worries. Were his mental measurements wrong? Did it not fit? Did something rip? Was Scar bleeding from a wound he hadn’t noticed and now the clothes were ruined? Had a

hero somehow teleported into the room while he wasn't looking?

Grian turned around, eyes finding Scar instantly.

And then, his gaze lowered. He sucked in a sharp breath, blood running cold.

Scar wasn't wearing a mask.

Grian whirled around again, panic soaring through him at record speed. An apology tumbled out, "God, Scar, I'm *so* sorry! I didn't realize you weren't wearing a mask, but I swear, I didn't see anything —!"

His voice cracked and he cut himself off, immediately struck with guilt over lying. Grian couldn't help it, though. It was impossible *not* to see when the guy was standing just a few feet away, blatantly maskless.

Even now, as he stared at the blank wall, his mind flashed with visions of everything he'd seen in that brief moment. There was a strong jawline, pink lips, a solid nose, and new scars that Grian had not previously been able to spot.

A dangerous part of himself declared that one brief look hadn't been enough, urging him to steal another peak and drink in the reality that was his friend's uncovered face. He fought it back, mortified.

"Grian, it's okay," Scar said, a sick sort of fondness in his tone. "I'm not wearing a mask on purpose."

“But,” Grian stammered. “But why not? I brought a fabric one. Did you not see me pull them out of the bag?”

“I did, and I really appreciate it,” Scar replied. “I just can’t afford to wear anything over my face right now. If a hero spots us, it’ll make me look even more suspicious.”

Grian supposed that made sense. The upper half of Scar’s face was well-known to the heroes, even when he donned civilian clothes. His enemies would be looking for a man like him — same build and hair color — and a random guy walking around with a face covering in the middle of the night *would* draw their attention immediately. It served to reason that the best way to subvert those expectations would be to remove the mask entirely from the equation.

However, that logic had completely disoriented Grian. He was dizzy, out of breath, filled to the brim with adrenaline from the shock. Scar might’ve been ready and willing to use his secret identity to his advantage, but the vet was clearly *not* on the same page.

“I said it was fine, G. You can turn around,” Scar called. “I’m okay with you looking.”

When Grian still didn’t move, he heard the other man sigh. Two steps echoed off the walls, and then a hand landed on his shoulder. Grian flinched as he was gently spun around. The moment a sliver of Scar’s face came into view, he squeezed his eyes shut, breath catching.

“Are you sure it’s fine?” He was certain he was being ridiculous, but every second of this felt taboo, like he was breaking a rule that never should be broken. Grian couldn’t make himself react differently, couldn’t make his brain accept the situation at hand. This felt like

something of untold importance – the last step in a sequence they'd been playing out for months.

"Grian," Scar whispered. "I told you it was *fine.* What's wrong?"

"I don't want to see your face just because you have no other choice," Grian blurted, and the room fell silent.

Until the words were out, Grian hadn't realized how much he meant them. However, now that he'd admitted it, he knew *that* was his real worry. He wasn't concerned that Scar might hurt him for discovering his true identity, or that this would shatter their friendship into pieces. They were past such a fragile point.

The reality of the matter lay in the intention behind the action. It was embarrassing, but it was the truth. Quietly, as if he might scare the other man away, Grian added, "I want you to *want* me to see."

"Oh," Scar replied, equally as soft. Grian felt his hands come up, and sucked in a breath as they ghosted along his jaw. "Oh, Grian."

Grian felt unbelievably stupid. He was making a big deal out of nothing, and he was fully aware of that. Scar gave him explicit consent multiple times, but he was still holding on to some nonexistent boundary between them.

"You're too sweet. This really isn't good for my heart."

The hands settled, cupping his face. Scar's palms were warm and anchoring, callused but not uncomfortable. The anxiety left him all at once.

“Grian,” Scar continued, smile audible. “There is no one else in the entire world that I want to see my face more than you. Please, look at me.”

At last, Grian listened.

He opened his eyes, and took in the sight that waited for him a few inches away. His breath left his lungs, and his cheeks heated. Never before had another person stolen his words so immediately, filled his brain with static so instantly.

Scar was smiling at him with those usual crinkled green eyes of his, sparkling and bright. Except, this time, it was possible to witness the full extent of that most lovely expression. Grian saw the way his lips parted, and his cheeks indented with dimples. He got to watch as Scar let out the smallest laugh, and the sound matched the movement of his mouth.

His face was covered in markings from old battles, long healed wounds and barely-there blemishes. They helped to emphasize the line of his jaw, and the rosy hue in his cheeks, adding character to someone who already overflowed with vibrance. Grian wanted to trace those patterns until the sun rose on the horizon, and then stare more at the way the daylight added to his friend’s endless shine.

The longer Grian looked, the deeper his blush grew. Redness crept along his cheeks, to his ears, down his neck, and dissolved into sparks of electricity as it reached the tips of his fingers. The feeling that he’d been refusing to name for ages surfaced with a fury.

He was a weak man before, when all he knew was an alias and a few of the guy’s most infamous crimes. Now, though, Grian had to force

his body weight to lean him further against the wall, fearing he might tip forward into dangerous territory.

"Unfair," he croaked out, hoarse and barely registering his own words. "You can't be charming *and* handsome."

As soon as he said it, Grian slapped a hand over his mouth.

The palms cupping his cheeks fell away, and it was Scar's turn to become a blushing mess. His voice came abruptly and slightly strained, "Really? You… think I'm handsome?"

Grian scoffed, partly at his own slip up, and partly at the absurdity of the situation he'd gotten himself into. Still, he answered, "Yeah… Not what I was expecting."

If he thought Scar's smiling face was a knock-out, Grian's heart practically caved in on itself when those lips tipped into a smug grin. With a brow raised, and his eyes shining, the mischief in his expression was stunning and treacherous. It sang with a kind of trouble that Grian couldn't resist.

"What *were* you expecting, Doctor?"

"I don't know," Grian replied honestly. He had to think about each breath he took. "The face of a hardened criminal, I guess? Less teeth, a crooked nose, maybe a half-grown out beard. It'd suit your terrible personality."

"Right, you wish," Scar huffed, rolling his eyes. "Luckily, I don't match the average expectation for a hardened criminal, do I? Y'know,

since *you* said I'm handsome."

"Yeah, luckily," the vet echoed. He forced himself to regain some amount of composure, urging the critical part of his brain to the forefront. "If you looked any different, the heroes would be more likely to pull us aside."

Now that he was able to observe clearly, Grian took in the sight of Scar in his clothes. The shirt was a little tight around the shoulders, but other than that, everything seemed to fit alright. Scar could absolutely pass as a regular civilian.

Well, almost.

"Come here," Grian said, extending a hand. Scar frowned, but leaned down anyway. Immediately, the vet began to drag his fingers through his friend's hair, which was disheveled beyond belief.

Grian wasn't surprised by the mess. He'd seen the way the heroes and villains ran across rooftops and jumped from jaw-dropping heights for the fun of it. Their hair was likely always tangled to some degree – slicked back according to Ringmaster's usual style or not.

Scar was, to his credit, patient while Grian fixed the visible strays. If he minded that he was being fretted over like a kid without the ability to care for himself, he didn't say anything.

"There we go! Much better," Grian declared after a minute. He scanned his friend for more details out of place, but found none. Scar looked as sweet and innocent as ever. "Okay. Go ahead and put your costume in my bag, and let's go."

Grian glanced past Scar, then paused.

"Scar, where *is* your costume?"

The floor of the bathroom was devoid of fabric, and his bag was deflated, meaning it was still mostly empty. The gas mask and Ringmaster costume seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

"I hid it." Scar jerked a hand up, pointing towards the ceiling. Grian raised his gaze, finding one of the overhead tiles was displaced slightly. "I'll come back and pick it up in the morning, but if, on some off chance, they search your bag, we'll be in trouble."

"Yeah, alright, makes sense," Grian replied. "So, are you ready to go, then?"

Scar nodded.

Grian took a deep breath, gathered his stuff, and together, they opened the bathroom door.

The chilly night air hit them at the same time. Grian was prepared, but Scar was significantly underdressed without his costume to keep out the wind. He shivered, and the vet's eyes lingered on the way the other man sucked in air through clenched teeth.

Before it could become embarrassing, he turned away, focusing entirely on walking forward. Grian took in the sight of the trees, cast in the soft glow of street lamps, the movement of shadowed leaves, the shivering of bushes as little critters darted between them. He did not think about Scar's warm palms cupping his jaw earlier, did not

think about his pretty face, did not think about the fact that he'd trusted him enough to show those features off in the first place.

In fact, he was so focused that he nearly ran into another person stopped just ahead. Grian wasn't expecting anybody to enter his view, so he was startled, not able to catch himself in time. Scar grabbed his hand at the last second, tugging him backwards right before they were set to collide. Grian was already halfway through an apology when he got his first good look at the newcomer.

A man draped in sparkling black robes stood before them, a head of bright blue hair on his shoulders and a mask over his eyes. There was a staff in his hands, which crackled with electricity. His stance was wide, purposely strong, as if preparing to move at the slightest suggestion from them.

Definitely *not* a civilian, then.

Grian's mouth fell open, apology melting into something mangled and impossible. Shakily, he raised a hand, pointing at the stranger.

"You're a *hero,"* he gasped, awestruck. "No way."

And not just any hero. Grian actually *recognized* this man from the front of countless magazines, as well as the headlining pictures of truly baffling amounts of news articles.

It was Morphling, the city's sweetheart, and a member of the notorious Gs.

He was known for his ability to shapeshift into any animal. While that

on its own didn't seem like much, watching him fight was terrifying. The guy could switch between a bear to strike with sharp claws, a shark to lunge with ripping teeth, and a bird to escape out of sight before his opponent could even recover.

"Very good observation," came an amused, slightly mocking tone from the hero. Morphling raised a brow, lips tipping up into a slight smile. His head tilted, and Grian felt as though, suddenly, he was being heavily scrutinized. "And you… seem to be entirely nondescript."

It took that sensation of being judged for Grian to remember his position.

He blinked, straightening his posture and squeezing Scar's hand tighter in his grasp. Grian needed to think clearly, needed to get them out of this unharmed. Between the two of them, he was the only one completely innocent here. Lies would be easier, more believable, if they came from his lips.

Grian started off by doing his best to seem borderline offended. "Excuse me? *Nondescript?"*

"I apologize," Morphling hummed, though there wasn't an ounce of sincerity in his voice. "I didn't mean it like that."

His modulator was off-putting. Instead of coming from a mask over his mouth, it was the result of a small device attached to a choker around his neck, directly manipulating the tone of his words as they left his voice box. The noise that came from his mouth was tinged into something almost robotic, and vaguely musical at the same time — like autotune, if autotune had an estranged, haunting cousin.

Combined with his too-relaxed posture, the guy unnerved Grian

beyond belief. He felt as though he was being watched by a predator, just waiting to jump out at its prey. It was an odd vibe to be picking up so soon into their interaction, because Grian could've sworn there was nothing suspicious about them. They hadn't even been given a chance to speak. Why were they already being observed this closely?

"Then, how did you mean it?" Grian put one hand on his hip, the other remaining firmly intertwined with Scar's own. It was comforting to know that his friend was so nearby during such a peculiar encounter.

"I'm sure you've seen the alerts, right?" Morphling gestured to the phone sticking halfway out of Grian's pocket. "There are dangerous criminals on the loose tonight. You'll have to pardon my blunt approach, but I can't help but be a little surprised to see you lovely men outside under these circumstances."

"Oh, so you're here to escort us home? Enforcing a curfew, are you?" Grian scoffed, rolling his eyes. His legs were shaking slightly. He wished he were allowed to move along, walk it out. However, since that wasn't an option, he forced himself to double down on his approach. "Look, there's no need for that. I'm a vet at Spanner's Emergency Clinic. I only recently got off shift, and I'm on my way home."

He was glad, at that point, for Scar's quick thinking when it came to Grian changing outfits. This could save them.

"An emergency vet, you say? I suppose that would make sense." Morphling's brows raised. Unfortunately, he wasn't fully buying the alibi yet. He prodded further, "Could I see some identification?"

"Identification? Sure, yeah," Grian replied. "Not a problem."

He relaxed a bit — this part was easy for him. As long as they were talking about him, focusing on him, buying his stories, he could go on forever. Anything to keep the heroes off Scar's back for a moment longer.

Grian pulled out his wallet, and flashed his veterinary ID. It wasn't anything fancy, nothing more than a little card he'd clip onto his lanyard whenever he came into work, but it was official enough. Whether it looked faked or cheaply made, the hero probably wouldn't care. Morphling would undoubtedly recognize how unlikely it would be for a villain to be carrying around a false veterinary identification for the rare occasion in which he's stopped at night.

As expected, after a quick look, the hero leaned back with a sigh.

"Alright. I believe it," he said. Grian almost felt relieved, but then the hero's head tipped towards Scar, and any semblance of happiness drained away. "And who are you? Another vet?"

Grian sucked in a breath, looking back at Scar. The other man appeared, at first glance, calm and composed. But Grian knew him — knew how to *actually* read him — even if he hadn't been able to see the guy's full facial expressions until a few minutes prior.

Scar's fingers were tightening their hold, and his free hand had to be shoved in his pocket to avoid revealing his nervous tendency to fidget. His eyes shone with a glassy sort of light, meaning he was trying too hard to stay subtly alert.

Not to mention, Scar had been tired when Grian first met him in the bathroom, and that hadn't really changed. His shoulders were slumped, posture heavy. With such little energy, concealing tells in

front of an opponent would be extra difficult.

Suddenly, the panic in Grian's heart spiked into his throat. If Scar said something wrong here, both of them would be in serious trouble. If he hesitated too long, talked too much, or stayed too quiet, they'd get revealed. Morphling was perceptive, and actively looking for evidence to prove their guilt. A hero like that wouldn't miss the signs for long.

Grian was jumping in before he could stop himself.

"This is my boyfriend," he blurted, forcing a tight smile onto his face. Scar's eyes widened ever so slightly, and Morphling made a noise of surprise. "He's walking me home. Came all the way to my work to do that because he was worried about the bank robbery. Isn't he sweet?"

"Oh? Your boyfriend?" The hero's gaze darted down to their connected hands. "I see. That *is* sweet."

Grian ignored the mental images that came to him when he imagined Scar as his partner. Those were not relevant to the task at hand, and only served to put them in further danger. It didn't matter that a pretty pink flush had come to Scar's face as soon as the idea was introduced, and it didn't matter that Grian's skin tingled along every point of contact between them.

Morphling whirled around to Grian again, lips pursed. "Where do you live, exactly?"

"Third street," Grian answered easily. He figured lying as little as possible was going to be the way out of this, and wavering would add more suspicion to their name.

But he definitely should've considered the validity of that response before saying it, because something in his response caused Morphling to frown.

"Third street? Interesting." Morphling tutted, "I know where both that and the Spanner's clinic are, but if you're commuting from work, this park is *awfully* out of the way for you."

"He's coming back to my place," Scar said. It startled Grian, as it was the first time he'd opened his mouth since the hero arrived. "I live near Mountain Street. It's through this park and two blocks down."

Maybe it was the amount of practice he had as an established villain, but even while his nervous tells were still plain as day, Scar spoke clearly. His voice didn't shake, and his tongue didn't trip over its words. He was the picture of confidence to any outside perspective. Honestly, Scar was so convincing, Grian almost believed he'd told the hero his actual home address.

"If I might ask," Scar continued, stepping closer to Morphling and looking around conspiratorially. "Is there a reason you're stopping us here, sir? Was there a villain sighting nearby? Should we be concerned?"

Morphling considered him. His eyes drifted between Scar and Grian, then back again.

It felt like a decision was being made, like this was the final test keeping them from safety. If they could get past the hero, they would be home free. Grian was itching to move, run, disappear into the night. As cool as it was to be speaking to one of the city's most famous protectors, he could only delight in it so much from the opposing side.

“It’s nothing,” Morphling said, breaking the tension. His head lulled back, and he sighed up at the sky. “Nothing that a civilian should need to worry about, at least. The Bamboozlers haven’t been purposely targeting innocents recently. They don’t even take hostages anymore. I doubt they plan on changing that tonight.”

Grian blinked, surprised. He chanced a look at Scar. The other appeared unbothered by that tidbit of information, as if he already knew it would be the answer.

Though the vet hadn’t paid enough attention to past cases, now that he thought about it, Grian couldn’t remember any times in which the Bamboozlers had gone out of their way to go after civilians as of late. But prior to their becoming friends, he definitely *could* recall hostage situations, innocents caught in the line of fire, and a couple of deaths of cops, exactly as the hero said.

The vet had to hand it to the Agency — they obviously knew the tendencies of their enemies, ever-changing as they apparently were.

Grian did wonder secretly to himself *why* the trio had changed, though.

“Not the *most* reassuring,” Scar muttered, drawing the vet from his head. “But I’ll trust you. Are we good to go? Do you need anything else?”

The hero clicked his tongue, eyes drifting. Grian flinched as a finger was pointed at his bag. “Would you mind if I checked that?”

The vet sucked in a breath. Scar squeezed his hand. It’d been a good decision to leave the costume behind after all.

Grian nodded, holding out the bag. Morphling took it, brows raising at its weight. He checked inside. “Huh. Fairly empty, isn’t it?”

“Most of my personal tools are back at the clinic being sterilized,” Grian replied, not missing a beat even as his heart definitely did. “I wasn’t going to leave my bag overnight.”

Morphling handed it over, putting his hands on his hips. “Okay. I’m going to let you off with a warning,” he concluded. “Ignoring crime alerts can be dangerous for you, while also impeding our ability to catch villains. Keep that in mind in the future.”

Scar gave a solemn nod, though from Grian’s point of view, there was a glint of amusement in his eyes. It was out of place — the kind of look he might wear when watching a prank play out. His visible nerves had also stilled, leaving only that minuscule shine and a general expression of false concern for the hero to read from him. Otherwise, he seemed completely relaxed.

Weirdo, Grian’s mind whispered. *Can’t believe he’s finding this funny.*

Rather than voicing anything genuinely running through his head, Grian replied, “Yes, we’ll be more careful next time. Thank you so much. Have a good evening.”

Before the hero had a chance to speak again, Scar dragged them both away.

Grian turned over his shoulder to get a final glance at Morphling, and was just in time to see him overtaken by a flash of blue. Something like a small explosion of energy and unnatural glowing occurred

around his form. What eventually emerged from the light was not human.

Grian shrieked as the small, feathered body of a dove zoomed past their heads, soaring up and over the park in a mere moment. Morphling was gone, presumably replaced by the form of that bird, off to do his heroic duties elsewhere.

Scar tugged on Grian's hand, slowing so they were walking shoulder to shoulder. Quietly, he whispered, "That was too easy. Morphling might follow us all the way back, so try not to lower your guard."

"Oh, great," Grian grumbled. "Just what we need."

His shoulders drooped, and it took everything in him not to just collapse onto the nearest bench. Grian had exhausted all of his energy getting them through that tense interaction. The late night was catching up with him. Yet, he was expected to continue until the hero disguised as a bird decided to stop following them?

He rubbed his face with his hand and groaned.

"C'mon, it's not *that* bad," Scar chuckled. "What? Do you hate the idea of being my pretend boyfriend that much? You can't handle a single lovey-dovey walk home with me?"

Grian straightened instantly, head whipping around to face Scar. The other man was grinning at him, wide and gleefully mischievous. Despite it being a beautiful sight, it sent a shiver down Grian's spine. He wasn't sure he would like being on the receiving end of this guy's antics when their overarching topic was being romantic with one another. With the butterflies already stirring in his gut, that could only ever end badly for him.

“No, idiot,” Grian replied, trying to seem far more nonchalant than he felt. “I am a wonderful actor. I was simply… worried that we were going to get caught in our lie. My place is the other way, but we told him we were going to yours.”

“That’s an easy fix,” Scar said, blinking innocently. “We *can* go to mine. We’re already walking in that direction. I didn’t lie about where it was.”

Grian’s mind went blank.

“What?”

Scar’s home? He was being taken to Scar’s home? Not the Bam Bunker, but Scar’s *civilian home?*

“Isn’t that–?”

Scar cut him off with a raised brow.

“It’s not dangerous,” the other man replied, shooting him a playful glare. “It’s not an invasion of my personal space. You’re not risking your life by coming to my place for a change.”

He tightened his grip on Grian’s hand, eyes far brighter than his outward expression.

“You keep jumping to conclusions whenever I try to show you something new,” Scar continued, scoffing and scrunching his nose. “Isn’t it *my* choice to let you see these things? Do you really still think I’m going to kill you every time I offer you a glimpse into my private life?”

Grian’s jaw dropped and he huffed out a quick, “That’s *not* what I was implying—!”

He stopped short.

It *had* been exactly what he was going to imply.

He looked away, defeated. “Sorry. I know you wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Scar hummed, perking back up the instant he got his way. “Now, cheer up, lovely boyfriend of mine. There’s a little birdy on the power line up ahead, and we can’t have you down in the dumps when I’m being *so* romantic.”

Grian shot him a glare, cheeks heating, but a subtle glance confirmed his friend was telling the truth. Though the bird was hardly visible, when searching with intention, the white feathers of a dove stuck out rather clearly against the night’s dark background.

Morphling had indeed not given up on his endeavor, exactly as Scar had suspected. Grian supposed it wasn’t just the heroes who knew their enemies well.

“Ugh, this is a lot of pressure,” Grian mumbled under his breath. Unfortunately, the wind wasn’t enough to keep that from reaching

Scar, who tilted his head curiously at the vet. “I’ve never had to pretend to have a boyfriend before.”

“Oh, yeah?” Scar smiled, clicking his tongue. “I guess that makes sense. You *are* quite the catch.”

Grian stumbled on the sidewalk, nearly tripping if not for Scar’s steadying hand on his shoulder. “I’m *what?”*

“Quite the catch,” Scar repeated. He made a big show of swinging their arms back and forth over and over again, elaborating as he went. “I bet you never had to find a fake date to your school dances. You probably just got real ones instead.”

“What? School dances?” Grian opened and closed his mouth several times confusedly. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Am I not allowed to talk about my tragic past with my beloved?” Scar had the gall to pretend to be hurt, pressing a hand over his heart and everything. “I’m so disappointed in you, babe. How will I ever recover?”

Grian gagged, reaching over and swatting at Scar’s head. The other dodged, laughing, “What? What’s that for? Why are you being violent?”

“Don’t call me *‘babe’* like we’re teenagers! I’m a grown man,” Grian said. He shuddered. “I pay taxes and rent and I have a doctorate. That’s gross.”

Scar’s laughter tapered off into something gentler. “Resorting to

bragging about your degree, are you? I didn't realize a simple nickname would strike such a nerve, Doctor."

Around them, the scenery of the park had melded into regular city streets. Lamps lit the way ahead as they made slow progress, in absolutely no hurry to get anywhere. The power line, utilized by one stray dove, passed by overhead. The two ignored it in favor of bickering with each other as they always did.

"I should be allowed to do that every so often," Grian decided, nodding to himself. "Bragging, I mean. Don't I deserve it after working so hard all the time?"

"Sure, sure, yeah," Scar agreed. "Fine by me. I've always liked my men with a bit of an ego."

"I like mine significantly less obnoxious," Grian snorted, smacking him gently. "I guess I got the short end of the stick, huh?"

The pink hue on his face was going to become a permanent feature, at this rate. He was alright with that, though, just for now. Scar wasn't unaffected himself, and that was enough for Grian to put aside his own worries briefly. As long as they were mutually mortified, he could keep himself from feeling completely stupid.

There was the faintest fluttering of wings, then the dove was disappearing further down the street, beating them to every mark on the way to their destination. Even with the hero confirmed to be out of sight, Scar didn't waver with his content smile, or the grip he had on Grian's hand.

Not that the vet was in a rush to change that fact. Honestly, it was the opposite. He was a little obsessed with how easily their fingers

intertwined and remained together. Grian was certain he'd never get tired of the feeling of wholeness this contact brought on. It was unlike any other in the world.

They kept walking at a mild pace, neither in a particularly large rush.

"Thank you," Scar said eventually, breaking the stillness. The teasing edge to his tone had evened out into a smooth softness. "I probably wouldn't have made it this far if you weren't here."

"Heroes or not," Grian sighed. "I'm sure you would've gotten home. You're too smart to get caught that easily."

"Well, maybe," Scar replied, nodding. "I meant in general, though. Thanks for everything, Doctor. You never had to do all this stuff. If you decided after my second or third time being injured that you were sick of this illegal work, I would've left you alone."

Grian gave him a funny look, confused as to what had brought this on. He took a deep breath and said, "Scar, you know how I have a tendency to get tense whenever you reveal parts of your identity?"

"Yes?"

"In the same way, *you* tend to thank me whenever I do something even vaguely nice for you," Grian accused. "Calm down a little, man. You're grateful, I know, but you make it seem like I'm sacrificing my entire life to help you out. I'm doing this willingly."

He watched Scar process that — his face changing from a confused frown, to a contemplative neutrality, to an almost-smile, and then

down again into a defeated slump.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like hearing it every now and again,” Grian continued. “But in the same way that I’m always tense, *you* seem to always be worried that I’ll forget how much you need my help.”

Grian tugged him closer, allowing their shoulders to bump into one another.

“We’re *both* predictable.”

Scar laughed, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Yeah,” he whispered. “I guess we are.”

Although the vet wasn’t really paying attention to their route anymore, the buildings around them had gradually switched from businesses to townhouses, and the roads had gotten slightly smaller. This district of the city was greener, lined with old trees and uninterrupted beauty.

They turned the corner, and he saw a nearby sign that indicated they’d reached Mountain Street. Grian scanned his surroundings, and spotted Scar’s car parked in front of one of the homes. The townhouse was similar to those around it, with bricks painted a pale green, and the windows accented with a tasteful white. The shutters were propped open, revealing a darkened interior.

It hit him, at that moment, harder than it had before. This really *was* Scar’s house, wasn’t it? Grian was actually going to see his friend’s home, wasn’t he?

He wanted to get lost in that fact, get lost in the wonder of the idea. Unfortunately, a leering dove had positioned itself in the branch of one of the trees that lined the quaint street. The atmosphere was disrupted by the gnawing feeling of being watched.

Grian suspected Scar was equally as irritated by it, because his steps suddenly picked up speed. His friend was careful to make it a subtle increase, so as not to tip off the hero, but the vet noticed. House after house passed them by. Some of them emitted golden glows from lamps positioned by windows, shining despite the hour. Others were as dark as Scar's own home.

The breeze whistled through the branches, rustling the leaves overhead. The air was sweeter here, permeated by the various flowers decorating the tiny bit of green space at the front of every townhouse. Each bush was in full bloom, every flower unfurled, allowing their petals to take on a layer of dew.

Finally, they came to a stop in front of a set of steps, leading up to the pale green house he'd seen earlier. Grian was pleased to discover that Scar too had nurtured a small shock of flowers on his plot. From the looks of their purple coloring, and the way the flowers were grouped together, he guessed it was a young lilac bush.

This one bush wasn't the only plant life for which Scar cared. As they ascended the steps, and paused at a white wooden door, there were two potted ferns guarding the threshold. Neither they nor the lilac bush seemed to be wasting away, obviously very loved.

His friend bent down to the pot on the left, and retrieved a tiny silver key from beneath it. Not the most secure place to hide such a thing, but Grian supposed anyone unlucky enough to break into this man's home was more at risk than Scar possibly could be.

Instead of immediately unlocking the door, Scar turned to face him. Grian raised a brow. “What’s up? Having second thoughts about letting me in?”

“No,” Scar replied instantly, then winced. “No, I’m just trying to remember if I cleaned before I left today.”

“Wait, really?” Grian snorted, tipping forward a bit to smile up at his friend. “Are you embarrassed that I might see you in a less-than-perfect state? That’s *never* happened before.”

He was delighted by the way Scar’s cheeks darkened, and his mouth opened and closed uselessly. After a second of gathering his bearings, he grumbled, “Yeah, I guess, but seeing me all bloody and gross is different from seeing my house in shambles.”

“Oh, come on,” Grian scoffed, swaying further into Scar’s personal space. He rubbed circles into the skin of the other man’s hand. A teasing smile spread over his face. “That’s a lame excuse. You don’t get to back out now.”

Scar didn’t respond. His eyes had glazed over, pupils dilating as he was distracted. His gaze didn’t meet Grian’s own, but rather, drifted down lower. There was something intense, both calculating and mindless in his expression. It made Grian want to shiver.

For the first time since they’d arrived at the house, Grian realized just how close the two of them were. There was an inch of space between their chests, with only the height difference preventing their faces from being the same way. Simultaneously, he was overcome with the urge to pull back, and to draw nearer.

Scar let out a shaky breath, swallowing. “Grian?”

His voice was a low rumble, quiet but clear. It was like freshly melted chocolate on a cold night, or rays of summer sun cast through a break in a canopy of leaves. Grian wanted to stop and enjoy its sound, let it wash over him, warm him to his core.

“Yes, Scar?”

A hand came up, tentatively ghosting over the small of Grian’s back.

“Excuse me for what I’m about to do,” Scar whispered.

Grian was pulled in fully at the same time as Scar dipped down and kissed him.

Instantly, the entire world came to a crashing halt. It was a soft thing, gently brimming with untold potential. Grian’s eyes widened, static rushing up to consume him. Fire licked along his skin where Scar held him close, his heart slamming against his ribs.

Everything clicked into place right at that exact moment, turning chaos into logic, fear into comfort, the unknown into familiarity. Grian knew the name of the feelings he’d been repressing, the ones he’d failed to acknowledge simply because he was scared of them. He knew the flutter of romance, the blush of intense interest, the pangs of developing affections.

Grian liked Scar.

For weeks now, whenever his heart gave an involuntary *thump,* his

mind conjured scenarios that no normal person would ever think up, or he allowed the other man to get away with things that he realistically shouldn't have, it'd all been because he *liked Scar*.

Grian wanted to be this close, wanted to kiss him, wanted their teasing and bickering to involve into this. He'd wanted Scar long before he'd seen his face, or learned his name. From the moment he had really begun to *know* the man, he'd started on this treacherous path towards loving him.

But before he could melt into it, let his entire being dissolve into it, the kiss was over. Scar pulled back. His breaths came quickly, and his face was hot to the touch. Grian was frozen in place, completely rapt by the sight of the lips he'd just felt against his own.

"Sorry," Scar said, eyes widened with disbelief. "I'm so sorry."

The words jarred Grian from where he'd fallen silent, like the honking of a horn on a lovely quiet morning. He physically recoiled, confusion furrowing his brows.

No part of him could understand why the other might be apologizing after such a perfect kiss. It was unexpected, but every bit what he'd always imagined and more. How could anyone second guess that? How could anyone question that? How could anyone look as upset as Scar did now about that?

Grian realized very abruptly that he hadn't gotten a chance to reciprocate. He'd been so caught up in his realization, in his entire universe beginning to make some sort of cosmic sense, that he hadn't kissed back or even moved at all. From Scar's perspective, he'd been stunned, not enjoying the connection in the slightest.

He didn't know how much the vet had been craving that, didn't know how long he'd dreamt of a moment like this one. Scar didn't know how often Grian thought of doing this exact thing, how often he wanted to grab the other by the collar of his blood-covered costume and pull him in. He was finding it to be a ridiculously frequent occurrence, especially now that he was allowing himself to feel this way.

Grian opened his mouth to express his intentions, to mend the accidental misunderstanding, but Scar cut him off by blurting, "I just figured that was what couples did after an evening out! A kiss on the porch is cheesy, I know, but I think Morphling is definitely convinced now. No questions in his mind!"

The vet paused. His heart stilled. "What?"

"Morphling's still watching us," Scar said, voice cracking. He cleared his throat. "Come on, let's go inside."

Grian felt something in him break as the other released him, turning to the door and unlocking it. Without their hands intertwined, and Scar's touch against his back, he felt unbelievably flimsy. A faint breeze could've knocked him over.

What had Scar just told him? It was an *act* for *Morphling?* Was that *really* what he'd just called the kiss that had solidified Grian's most tender emotion into definite reality? An act?

He couldn't believe his own ears. There was nothing stupider in the entire world than that. Grian had felt the kiss, felt the passion, felt the reciprocated yearning.

Or, at least, he *thought* he'd felt that.

His legs shook and his chest ached.

Grian didn't have the most experience with romance – nothing beyond a few partners here and there. His schedule was odd due to his job, and his youth had been spent studying to get his doctorate. He didn't know, in truth, what actual mutuality felt like. He'd assumed it was that, but if Scar was declaring that it wasn't, then how was he to be sure?

When he moved to follow Scar inside, it was completely on autopilot. There was a ringing in his ears, as well as a new dizziness springing up in his skull.

A kiss for show.

Scar had only kissed him to ensure a hero would buy their story. Nothing more, no matter how world-shattering it had been for Grian.

He should've known from the softness of the other's lips on his, from the chaste way he was given just a taste of what he'd always wanted. It wasn't everything it could've been. It wasn't layered with real emotion. It wasn't an expression of actual care.

Grian had believed, for a second, that it was genuine, and he'd been a fool to do so.

It made sense, looking back, for it not to be, but the mind was cruel in its present perception. He was an idiot for getting thrown off balance so easily. Grian was gullible and stupid, and now he was paying the price for it.

He hardly noticed the interior of the home he'd entered over the throbbing of his chest. Through thick emotions, he noted it was a lot like Scar's tiny room at his base – all earthy tones and soft edges. Nothing looked out of place. The little bit of visible mess was the expected sink full of dirty dishes and a couple of empty to-go boxes on a table.

Scar talked at him for several minutes, explaining his design choices and home layout in far too much detail, words spilling out faster than they could be processed. Grian's mind spun, but he listened to every second of it, because his ears were always happy to catch the slightest sliver of the other's voice. They hadn't yet taken into account his heartbreak.

The townhouse itself wasn't large, but it had high ceilings, two floors, and an attic for storage. The downstairs held the kitchen, dining room, and living room, whereas the upstairs had the master bedroom and a guest bedroom. Scar explained all of this to him, pausing when he noticed Grian was struggling to digest the information.

"Sorry again, Doctor," Scar sighed, a profound sadness glimmering in his eyes. The apology was like a repetitive stab to the chest. It took everything in Grian not to react. He focused only on the other man, not on himself. "I should've asked before deciding on a way to solve our issue on my own. I see now that all I did was make you uncomfortable."

Grian blinked, throat closing at the mere suggestion of being *uncomfortable* around *Scar*.

He shook his head frantically. "No, Scar, really," Grian tripped over himself to say. "It's fine. I didn't mind. It was smart. I wasn't expecting it – that's all."

His chest ached. Damn his people-pleasing need to always make sure Scar wasn't terribly upset. Even in the midst of some of the worst pain he'd ever experienced, he couldn't stand the thought of his companion viewing him that way.

"Oh, okay. Good." Scar looked a little relieved. He continued, laughing sheepishly, "I just thought, y'know, a romantic gesture might get him off our tail and solidify our alibis."

Grian nodded stiffly, full to bursting with unchecked emotional baggage, but stopped when he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

Scar had begun fidgeting again.

Subconsciously, he was pulling at the hem of his shirt, chewing on his lips, letting his hands come up and drag through his hair a little too often. It was as if he couldn't remain still, as if every syllable spoken had to be punctuated by movement, as if his limbs were communicating something his mouth could not.

Grian knew what those actions meant, especially when combined with the way he wouldn't fully make eye contact. He'd seen them when they were about to pull a prank, when they were trying to get a rise out of the two other Bamboozlers, and just now, when they were talking to the hero.

Those were nervous tells.

Scar was *lying*.

Grian's mind went blank, honing in on every little motion.

Why would Scar be lying right now? What exactly was there to lie *about?* Everything he was saying sounded perfectly reasonable, so what was prompting him to behave like he was being interrogated again?

An unwelcome part of the vet's head whispered an idea to him that set his cheeks alight, and widened his eyes all over again. It brought him back to their kiss on the porch, to the blurted apology, to the nervous rambling about the decor. It sat like a rock in his gut, while simultaneously making his heart feel infinitely lighter.

Worst of all, it had the potential to be completely true – not just some overstatement by his mind, or a conclusion he'd reached without evidence.

Grian was so immediately embarrassed by his own almost-discovery that he wasn't able to get his expression in check before Scar noticed.

"Grian? Are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh, um," Grian stammered. Suddenly, being in Scar's presence again was dangerous. "Yes, yeah, fine. I'm just… suddenly realizing how tired I am. How long do you think we have to wait for Morphling to leave before I can head back to my place?"

"Back to your place? While the heroes are still out?" Scar scrunched up his nose, shaking his head. "Absolutely not. You're staying in my guest room tonight."

Grian's eyes nearly jumped out of his head. "Stay here? With you? No, I couldn't possibly! Uh, I have no overnight bag. No pajamas or anything."

"You can borrow some of my clothes," Scar said easily. "Then, we'll be even. C'mon, follow me."

Without another word, he turned and trotted up the stairs. Grian hesitated for a second, short-circuiting, but eventually mustered up the energy required to move. He didn't have much choice. If he didn't trail after the other, he could be questioned again, and he really didn't trust himself not to answer too honestly.

The guest room that Scar showed him to was nice. It had a double bed with a plush, blue comforter, and white pillows neatly propped up against a wicker headboard. The carpet was soft underfoot, and very well-maintained. There was a dresser, a desk, and a decorative shrub in one corner. It wasn't overly filled, but it felt homely all the same.

Scar disappeared down the hall and returned with a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie from his closet. Grian accepted them gratefully. As soon as that was out of the way, Scar moved onto another matter, "Do you need to shower or anything? Should I get you a towel?"

"No, uh, this is perfect," Grian replied, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Could I bother you for maybe a glass of water, though?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," Scar said, already turning and leaving the room. "You want ice?"

“Yes, please,” Grian called after him. “Thank you!”

He stepped inside, and collapsed against the closed door. His face flushed, head reeling, and heart thundering away behind his ribs. Grian felt like a child with a crush for the first time, like he was drowning at the same time as he was flying, like every single action taken around him was further proof towards his theory.

Scar was lying earlier, but the exact subject that caused him to do so was up in the air. Grian had a suspicion, one that sent electricity through his veins and heat to his cheeks, but that he desperately wanted to be true.

He needed more time to prove it, more time to gather evidence, more time to analyze, more time to come to terms with these feelings. Staying over for a single night was a good start, but he needed to take a step back and view the world through this lens for a while, if only to bask in the thrill of it.

Scar might not have been kissing him for show. He might’ve wanted it just as much as Grian did. And wasn’t that a wonderful possibility? Wasn’t that an experiment worth lifetimes of research? Wasn’t that something he could latch onto while the truth evaded him, at least for now?

With a renewed energy, and an extra pep in his step, he used the remainder of his time alone to get changed.

As expected, both the pants and the hoodie were big on him. Not by much, since Scar had likely found the smallest selection from his closet, but it was still a little loose. Thankfully, the sweatpants had drawstrings, so they weren’t going to fall off.

It was good to get into something more comfortable. He did not notice *at all* the way that everything smelled like Scar, or think about how this meant they were both actively wearing each other's clothes.

And of course, those thoughts – which he did not have – had no effect on his heart rate, the butterflies in his gut, the redness of his cheeks, and absolutely didn't do anything to encourage the whisper in his mind. To imply otherwise would be ridiculous, delusional.

A knock came at the door, and Grian opened it. Scar held out a glass of water, speaking without missing a beat, "Alright, is there anything else I can–"

His sentence died on his lips as he saw Grian. Scar's eyes drifted down over him, and then gradually back up. His lips were parted in shock, chest rising and falling quickly. Grian noticed the water was rippling from the white-knuckle grip Scar had on its glass. He rushed to take it before any could spill.

"Scar, what's the matter with you?" Grian said, raising a brow. "Cat got your tongue or something?"

"Cat?" Scar's voice was weak, barely audible. He straightened, snapping his fingers. "Cat! Where's Jellie?"

Without another word, the guy wandered off, leaving Grian alone in the doorway. Baffled and slightly awestruck by his sudden shift in behavior, the vet followed after him. Scar trailed down the hall listlessly. Grian didn't fully enter his room when he turned in there, but the vet did linger at the threshold.

Scar's room was a near carbon copy of his one at the Bam Bunker, with the bamboo accents and everything. It was clear he had a

favorite decorative choice when it came to his most personal spaces. The only variances were the smattering of framed posters from old bands and classic movies that dotted the walls. In that area too, Grian noticed a pattern of mostly space-adjacent themes.

“There you are!”

Grian looked over as Scar’s tone tipped up into something he’d heard in the past when the guy was talking to Pearl and Maui. Unsurprisingly, he saw Scar bend and scoop a little grey cat out of an armchair in the corner. She purred loudly, snuggling into his chest as he cooed at her.

“Hello, Jellie,” he chuckled. “Did you miss me, honey?”

“Oh, so this is the famous Queen Jellie?” Grian smiled at the sight of the pet he’d heard so much about. Scar brought her over, and Grian let her sniff his hand. Evidently, she was better with guests than his cats, as she didn’t hiss or grow anxious from his presence. “You are just so sweet, aren’t you?”

After weeks of Scar chatting about her, it felt a little like meeting a celebrity. He definitely understood the hype. Jellie was an adorable thing, and clearly well cared for by her owner. Her coat was shiny, her eyes were bright, she moved with energy as she tried to practically climb onto Scar’s shoulder to snuggle in closer.

“If you leave your door cracked tonight,” Scar told him, voice slightly muffled as Jellie chose that moment to shove her tail in his face. “She’ll probably come to sleep with you. Jellie loves new people.”

“I will absolutely be doing that,” Grian said, smiling so widely that his cheeks had begun to hurt. “I’m sure I’ll get lots of good rest with her

by my side."

Scar rolled his eyes, huffing, "Great, now I'm jealous."

"Hey, if you're worried she might like me more, I'll shut the door," Grian said, shrugging. "But then, you'll have to admit that you're only winning by forfeit."

"No, no, let's do this fair and square," Scar replied. He flashed a smile in the vet's direction. "I'm going to settle in now, G. You know where to find me if you need anything else."

Grian's eyes got stuck on his friend's expression. His lips burned, remembering suddenly what it'd felt like to have that smile pressed against them. He forced himself from that daydream, replying hastily, "Yes, yeah, of course. Goodnight, Scar! Sleep well!"

"Goodnight," Scar said, but Grian was escaping into the guest room before the word was even out.

The door was left slightly ajar, Grian switched off the light, and threw himself onto the bed.

He wanted to say that sleep came to him easily. The mattress was soft, and he was tired. The day had been arduous, packed to the brim with surprises. He wanted nothing more than to let it fade into background noise, to stop thinking about it until he was well rested and capable of critical thought.

But that just wasn't what happened. Unconsciousness was hesitant to encroach on his racing thoughts, made worse by the smell of Scar on

every aspect of that damned guest room. The second he thought he was finally on the brink of rest, another vision of that pretty face and brilliant kiss would burn itself into his eyelids, and he'd be doomed to focus on it for another half an hour.

When she did eventually decide to join him, Jellie helped the process by sitting herself directly on his chest, providing a comforting weight while he drifted off. It was the last push he needed to finally fall under.

Grian slept fitfully through the night, though, awaking to an alarm from his phone far earlier than he wanted. His first thoughts were about their kiss, set to plague him evermore should nothing become of his theory.

By the time he was dressed, with vague effort put into brushing his bedhead down with his fingers, Scar was also awake.

He'd made breakfast, and announced that excitedly the second Grian arrived in the kitchen. Bacon, eggs, and fluffy pancakes were put onto a plate in front of him. Grian was able to enjoy Scar's cooking to the fullest extent, this time while also enjoying the sight of him first thing in the morning, and both were delicious.

Neither of them talked much, aside from idle conversation about the meal and gratitude for the mutual favors they'd exchanged. They were both clearly tired from the night's events. Scar didn't apologize again, thankfully, and Grian didn't pry.

He wanted time to ensure he was absolutely correct, so he'd allow them to stray away from the awkward topic for the moment. Grian had to get back to his apartment so he could change for work anyway. Scar offered to drive him, and they spent the remainder of their morning together in comfortable silence.

When they went their separate ways, Grian felt strangely whole, like he finally had something to look forward to. Hopefully, if all went well, he would.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Tuesday! That was a doozy - 21k words, man. Three days ago, this chapter was only 10k. No one can say I don't have a passion for what I do.

I hope you enjoyed! We still have a decent amount of story left before the ending, but progress is definitely being made, that's for sure! Congratulations to everyone who solved my puzzle on social media and correctly guessed the spoiler word for this week to be 'kiss,' that was super fun to do with you guys!

Thank you also for 60k hits. I'm just in awe every single week, and I cannot believe it! I love you guys!

As per usual, the link to my discord server is available here! And you should absolutely follow my beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! See you next week!!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> VERY IMPORTANT THING IN THE END NOTES! MAKE SURE YOU READ IT!
>
> AND REMEMBER TO TAG YOUR SPOILERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA, YOU HOOLIGANS!
>
> Happy Tuesday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gathering information on another person's emotional state was not quite as simple as Grian had expected it to be. He'd assumed that, in the wake of their kiss, a shift would occur that might point towards a clear answer and solve every problem the vet had ever thought up. From there, he'd be able to come to a conclusion and either put his feelings to bed, or act on them.

Life, however, was anything but constant.

None of the Bamboozlers had gotten caught after their heist two days prior. Scar had called to reassure him of this when Grian had noticed the news being purposely vague about the whole ordeal. The reporters were all repeatedly assuring the civilians that things were under control, that the necessary steps had been taken, and that they no longer had to worry.

Apparently, that was just a tactic on the Agency's part to disguise the severity of the incident – damage control. They hadn't caught the perpetrators, nor had they recovered anything from the robbery, so they were clearly panicking a bit. Whatever was in that safe really had them up in arms. Their so called 'steps' were unlikely to be anything genuinely worth worrying over.

Thankfully, the Bamboozlers had gotten away from the scene of the crime with only a few minor hiccups, all of which Scar was happy to relay to Grian over the phone.

From what his friend said, Lizzie hadn't been able to get back to her home due to Slayer on her tail. She'd been forced to use her powers, despite being horribly tired from the mission already, and duck into the Bam Bunker, which was luckily near enough. It still took around two hours to find the chance to do so, though, because Slayer's power could cut through Eclipse's blindness. One would have to first tempt the hero into using her power, and attack during the cooldown.

Somehow, Jimmy had an even less fortunate time.

He couldn't fight back due to the cast still over his fingers, so running away was his best bet. As Scar had explained, though, sprinting was difficult while trying to remain quiet and invisible. It led to his opponents, Blackhole and Audiophile, following him through several laps of the downtown area before he could be successfully lost.

Teleportation powers were able to cover distances faster than Jimmy physically could, enhanced hearing could track every little movement he made, and the villain was unable to stay invisible for long while exhausted. It was a cacophony of the worst possible outcomes until he was able to scale the side of a building and hide on a fire escape until they vacated the area.

On top of that mess, Blackhole seemed to have absolutely no problem punching a man who couldn't hit back, and his specially-designed metal gloves made sure every blow hurt. Audiophile had been more focused on keeping track of what his ears could catch, and hadn't joined in on the beating quite as much. Still, Jimmy's face was sporting more than a few bruises after being at the receiving end for up to an hour.

Grian hadn't expected himself and Scar to have the easiest of all the run-ins with the heroes. Morphling was persistent, but not physical. They'd made it out unharmed and in record time compared to the others. For all that it had inwardly killed Grian, their civilian routine *had* worked.

The severity of the rest of the Bamboozlers' encounters was also a feasible explanation as to why Grian had heard next to nothing about their condition until that specific phone call. It was due to the group's usual policy during high-intensity heists, which had been mentioned to him briefly in the past, but was recounted for him in detail this time around.

"We always wait exactly twenty-four hours to check in with each other, since Lizzie had a solo mission a while back that we almost ruined by trying to communicate with her," Scar had told him, phone shuffling as he moved around on the other end of the line. *"She was breaking an old villain friend of hers out of jail, which led to a day-long chase through the city as the heroes tried to catch the both of them. Crazy stuff."*

Grian had hummed, "And how'd you almost ruin it?"

"Lizzie went out without us, so obviously we were worried, and we didn't realize she was involved in a chase," Scar went on. *"She was hiding, trying to lose them while waiting for her powers to recharge, and we tried to check in, and it scared her enough to make her accidentally reveal her hiding spot. So, yeah, no more of that."*

"You can't, like, text with your civilian phones?" Grian opened his laptop, balancing his phone between his cheek and shoulder as he searched for whatever case Scar was talking about. He found a couple of results to read later. "Y'know, since you don't take those on missions, and you'd only be able to respond when you're at home?"

“Nah, that’s not safe either,” Scar sighed. *“If one of us is caught, it’s only a matter of time before their civilian home is raided, and their phone is found. A text at that point could give the rest of us away.”*

Grian hadn’t considered that, but it made sense once it was said. There was a reason he wasn’t the villain between the two of them. The Bamboozlers were ten steps ahead of him in every subject that wasn’t medical.

The call ended soon after that point without much else exchanged between them. Grian had *intended* to listen to Scar’s voice and try and decipher any lingering awkwardness from it, but it’d been indistinguishable from his usual tonality. From that interaction alone, his little experiment was off to a bad start.

To get his mind away from his shortcomings, he returned his attention to his computer. The search results regarding the old jailbreak were still on the screen. He clicked on one article and scanned it quickly. It was written four years prior, and the page had shockingly few views for its subject matter.

The report itself stated something similar to what was already explained to him, though the Agency’s sugarcoating and downplaying was rife throughout it. If it really were recounting the details of a failing of the heroes’ security systems, he wouldn’t be surprised to see anything about it repressed.

The villain that Lizzie saved was not one Grian had heard about before. Surprising, considering the trouble that had evidently been caused by his escape. He was called Locust throughout the article, but when the vet searched for that alias, only information about the bug came up. No amount of specification changed that.

Grian typed a wide variety into his browser.

‘Locust jailbreak.’

‘Jailbreak four years ago Locust.’

‘Locust escaped with Eclipse.’

Nothing.

It seemed only his use of Eclipse’s alias had allowed him to find the original results in the first place. So much as mentioning Locust caused the results to be censored. He was no investigative journalist, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on. The Agency clearly didn’t want that information to be found, and they were perfectly content to tamper with the past to make it happen.

Luckily, Grian *did* have an extensive history of crawling through the depths of the internet to find things that he wasn’t supposed to see. Namely, academic journals hidden behind paywalls, and pirated versions of movies. Tracking down details on an unknown villain wasn’t too different.

An online forum, now hugely inactive, was where he eventually found what he needed. The whole thread seemed to focus on smaller villains that were around at the time. A good portion had since been knocked out of the field or arrested, but notably, they were all people that Grian had heard of before.

He saw Locust for the first time when he was almost to the bottom of the page. Hidden amongst clips of fights from people in varying amounts of spandex, he saw a person he didn’t recognize. Grian clicked on the video, and watched all the way through.

It was shaky footage from a phone camera, obviously taken by a civilian hiding on the balcony of a building near the fight. He sat up a bit straighter as he saw Morphling standing in the middle of the street, his electric staff crackling just as it was the night Grian had met him. His hair was dyed red instead of blue, but his costume was unmistakable.

The audio caught the sound of a loud laugh, one that was very obviously distorted by a voice modulator, but it didn't come from the hero. Without warning, the road in front of Morphling split open, and a thorny vine shot upwards, grabbing the guy by his wrist. His staff was dropped, and fully engulfed by another cacophony of vines that emerged from the earth.

Finally, the camera panned over to the figure standing on the other end of the street, one hand outstretched.

Even through the blurry lens, Grian could see a costume that looked like it was made of fragments of flower petals. The villain wore long, green pants, with a top that fluttered with pinks and reds as he cackled. He wore a hood that resembled a large leaf, and which came up to cover the lower half of his face.

Morphling was quick to escape his bindings by shifting into a smaller creature, and then switching into a tiger to cut his staff free. The vines were troublesome, though, continuously emerging from the split in the pavement to grab at the hero's limbs, his staff, even his cloak.

When they did eventually engage in hand-to-hand combat, it was hard to keep up. Locust moved fast – faster than a weapon as large as Morphling's could keep up with. As they spun around one another, Grian was able to see that the villain also had a cape draped over his shoulders. It was a shimmering, slightly translucent thing, vaguely reminiscent of a pair of fairy wings that had been folded over his

back.

Halfway through their close combat, Locust dropped low and rolled out of the way of an attack. Before even beginning to stand, he rocked his weight back onto his hand, kicking to sweep Morphling's legs out from underneath him. Something about it struck the vet as familiar. He paused and rewound the video several times before he realized why that move was recognizable.

It was reminding him of *Lizzie*.

Actually, a *lot* of this guy's fighting style reminded him of Lizzie. His lightning-quick movements, utilization of his whole body when it came to fighting, and his unpredictability. Lizzie did all of those same things, though she incorporated a lot more offensive moves than this guy did. Grian wouldn't be surprised if the two had trained together at some point – a fact that would also explain Locust's ability to maneuver around a staff with ease.

This singular detail practically confirmed to him that they had been friends at some point in time. It was a little surreal, but it was undeniable.

The video did not, however, explain what had happened to cause the Agency to wipe the guy's very existence off the face of the planet. There was no mention of him on the forum any sooner than four years ago, and even those were few and far between.

Only one comment from an unknown account made Grian stop his scrolling.

Posted 4 years ago by @deleted-user

What do you guys think about the theory that Locust defected? The Agency did mention a new hero debuting soon? Just saying!!

"Defected?" Grian muttered aloud to himself, "A villain can defect?"

The comment didn't have any replies or likes, though. Grian couldn't fully trust it without sufficient confirmation that it was a valid thought process.

His search ended shortly after, once he'd reached the bottom of the forum. It wasn't possible to locate more pieces of information. His curiosity would have to be satiated from that much alone. Locust was definitely a real person, one that had, at some point, been close enough to Lizzie to have a similar fighting style.

Unable to do anything else, Grian had just packed up and gone to work. He no longer had to fret over the Bamboozlers' health, and he had a lot to mull over on his walk to the clinic. On top of his plan to discover if their kiss was genuine, now he had to contemplate the reasoning behind a villain potentially becoming a hero.

Thankfully, the former of those problems had an answer he could more readily work towards. In the period of time between his visits with the Bamboozlers, he would have plenty of opportunities to invent ways to prove his hypothesis.

There was, of course, the ever-obvious revelation through Scar's patterns of speech. If Grian could catch him in more lies, they would eventually add up into worthwhile evidence. He could also look out for slip-ups, hesitancy, avoidance of certain topics, and so forth. These would be harder, though, since they could be difficult to distinguish from jokes.

A few peer-reviewed psychology journals had suggested Grian also keep an eye out for body language. Research had led him to discover that frequent fidgeting, a lack of eye contact, an influx in getting caught staring, and subtle decreases in space between them were other indications of how one might be able to tell.

Unfortunately, he wasn't sure body language would be the most useful under his particular set of circumstances. Scar was prone to doing all of those things already, long before Grian had noticed anything more than platonic feelings between them. They were just regular parts of his mannerisms, it seemed. Studies published in journals couldn't always account for every single person's actions, at the end of the day.

Either way, he planned to keep an eye on changes to their typical routine during his expedition for the truth.

Another possible method, and the one from which he was most likely to gain results was flirting. Monitoring how well Scar handled certain levels of expressed admiration, how coherently he responded, and if it became a reciprocal thing was a definite way to be certain of the theory he hoped was true. And he was pretty sure that it wouldn't take too much effort on his end to achieve either.

Which was, as anyone with more experience than a couple of one off dates and short-term partners could've told him, a massive misconception.

Unfortunately, Grian didn't learn that until three days later, when he finally saw Scar in person again.

It wasn't an expected visit — a factor that didn't necessarily *cause* his utter failure, but absolutely played a part in forming it. This wasn't an encounter with any member of the Bamboozlers while in costume, or when they were in need of medical assistance. It was the polar

opposite, in fact.

Grian was shopping at his usual grocery store, a mindless endeavor. The building itself was located not far from the park where he'd saved Scar, but he didn't really think about the implications of its placement. He didn't think about the fact that his apartment wasn't a huge distance from a certain townhouse. He didn't think about the fact that everyone had to buy food somewhere, and that there wasn't another grocery store for a couple of blocks.

He only realized all of that when he was pushing his shopping cart down the snack aisle and nearly tripped over his feet at the sight of a familiar side profile.

The first thing that shocked Grian about seeing Scar in public was the normal way in which the interaction began. Scar wasn't lurking in the shadows, wasn't strategically waiting for them to bump into one another, or stepping into view from around a corner. It wasn't a manicured, flashy entrance like the kind the vet was used to witnessing.

Instead, Scar was simply standing there, reaching for a bag of chips with a pensive expression on his face. He was wearing baggy clothing, with colors faded from years of repetitive washing. His hair was spiking upwards in some areas, as if he had rolled out of bed a few minutes prior and not even bothered to run his hands through it.

And it was at this first unexpected glance that Grian experienced the start of many uncontrollable mishaps.

His heart gave a leap up into his throat, and startled a small, squeaky noise out of him. This did, of course, prompt Scar to check over his shoulder, and the second their eyes met, Grian was bombarded with thousands of visions of their kiss. The vet's tongue went numb, face

flushed red, and his whole body weight was leaned onto his cart. The latter reaction caused the wheels to jerk to the side and accidentally bump into the very man at which he had been gawking.

The impact made Scar scrunch up his lovely, unmasked face and hiss in pain, “Ow, ow! What was *that* for?”

“Oh my God,” Grian babbled. “I’m *so* sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going and you just—! And then I—!”

“Geez, Doctor,” Scar gritted out, dropping his bag of chips back onto the shelf to clutch at his hip. “You know, when you bump into someone in public, it’s usually not so literal. That is definitely going to bruise.”

Grian wanted to reply quickly. He wanted to say something witty, something along the lines of their usual back and forth like, *“You probably deserve it.”*

Unfortunately, Scar chose that moment to open his eyes and look at the vet directly. Under the glare of the overhead fluorescents, the green color was exceedingly vibrant, like shocks of forest leaves or moss upon a cliffside. Or maybe that was just Grian’s mind inflating details again. It seemed to be doing that a lot when he imagined Scar’s appearance as of late.

“Um, Grian?” Scar tilted his head, amusement filtering into his already perfect countenance. Grian was mortified by the way his name from those lips sent shockwaves through his body and jarred him efficiently back into the present. “Is something the matter? Did I scare you somehow?”

“Scare me? No,” Grian heard himself say, though his actual mind was

miles away. “I was just…”

Again, he wanted to say something on topic — something witty to foster banter between them and help him in reaching his end conclusion. A comment that could have sufficed would’ve been along the lines of, *“I was just admiring the view.”*

Instead, like the eloquent fool he was, Grian simply trailed off, staring at Scar in abject horror as he realized why his entire plan was going to fail.

He couldn’t flirt.

Grian *couldn’t flirt.*

Realistically, logically, statistically, psychologically, medically, there was nothing *preventing* him from being able to flirt. Hell, he’d even come up with a million lines ahead of time on the off chance he’d get to use them in conversation.

Now, though, that conversation was here, and Grian was finding out that no amount of science or research could overpower the firm grip that this singular man held over his entire being. Whether he was capable of forming rational thoughts, experiencing stable feelings, reacting in expected ways, speaking the sentences he’d rehearsed in his head a million times — all of that depended on Scar.

And since Scar had decided to look so damn good in the middle of a grocery store aisle, Grian’s mind had decided that silence was the most he could manage.

His plans had just gotten a whole lot harder.

"Doctor?" Scar's amusement shifted into concern, and he stepped forward. To Grian's absolute displeasure, as the impending disaster was visible from miles away, Scar reached up and placed a hand on his forehead. "Are you alright? You're acting really weird."

Scar's palm was warm, familiar. His touch was tempting, encompassing. Grian almost wished he were actually sick, and able to justify the way his cheeks burned from such a minor amount of contact.

Although, it wasn't the minor contact that made him so embarrassed. The thoughts that accompanied it were far worse. His memories like to remind him of what it had felt when this same hand had pulled him in, right as Scar had dipped down, right as he'd pressed their lips together, right as he'd both ruined and enlightened Grian in one fell swoop.

"Oh, yeah, um," Grian stammered, but it was too late for him. "I'm *so* okay. Just peachy."

Scar didn't look entirely convinced, but he withdrew his hand anyway. Grian, mortifyingly, almost complained about it. He bit his tongue *hard* to keep those most unmentionable feelings of his under control.

"Uh, alright," Scar said, frowning. "Anyway, it's funny to run into you here. I didn't realize we shopped at the same store."

"Mhm, me either," Grian croaked. Some amount of control returned to him, but only enough to manage casual replies. He was not going to be able to handle anything regarding his theory for the foreseeable

future. “Makes sense, I guess. Our neighborhoods aren’t far from each other.”

“They aren’t,” Scar agreed. “It was really convenient anytime I needed to get home after seeing you.”

Grian gave a weak laugh, “Right. I can imagine it would be.”

An awkward quiet settled over them. Grian couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt well and truly *awkward* around Scar. It was disorienting. He rocked on his heels, gripping onto the handle of the shopping cart like it was all that was keeping him anchored. Although, that wasn’t actually something reliable, given its squeaky wheels were practically begging to slip out from underneath him with every second that passed.

“Well,” Scar said, sucking a breath in through his teeth. He gestured to his basket, which was on the ground at his feet. A handful of ingredients were waiting there, and the bag of chips he’d been grabbing when he was rudely interrupted was added to the mix. “I’m stocking up. What’s up with you? How’s your day?”

“Same, and it’s not bad,” Grian replied, suddenly both overwhelmed and completely enthralled. “And you? How’s your day?”

“Could be worse,” Scar said, pursing his lips. “That drive we got the other day has been giving us some problems recently. It’s apparently locked behind some pretty advanced firewalls or whatever, so we have to have a specialist look into it. Besides that, nothing interesting is going on.”

“That sucks,” the vet tutted, shaking his head almost robotically. Scar’s posture changed, as if he were noticing the odd behavior.

Suddenly, Grian felt like he was under a microscope. “Actually, I need to… get going. I have a shift later, and I have to finish my shopping.”

“Oh, really? You do?” Scar raised a brow. “But your shift isn’t until later tonight?”

“Ah,” Grian said, wincing. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it? Must’ve lost track of the day.”

Scar blinked, eyes trailing to Grian’s wrist, where a certain timepiece ticked down the seconds. The smile he tossed the vet was smug. “Do I need to steal another for you, Doctor?”

Grian flushed brighter, slapping a hand over the watchface. “No! Absolutely not. If you so much as *think–”*

“You’ll do what, Doctor?” Scar took a step closer and leaned in slightly, his form blocking out the lights for only a moment. The shine reflecting in his irises still felt as warm as all the rays of the sun, though. “If I steal for you again, how do you plan to discourage me?”

Grian was pretty sure that this was what it was like to be on the brink of death. This weightlessness and buzzing in his veins, combined with the heat in his cheeks and the butterflies in his gut made it impossible to process the world around him. Scar was standing a foot away, in arm’s reach, and wearing that terribly charming grin.

In a moment of panic, the vet could almost always count on the logical part of his brain to chime in with information that was absolutely not useful to him in the slightest. Right then, it was commenting on Scar’s open body language, half lidded eyes, and tilted posture — all of which were indications of flirtatious intent as stated by the numerous papers he’d read.

Grian's brain, unhelpfully, listed off the most embarrassing things he could possibly respond with at mach speed. None of them were things he could possibly form into words, knowing his track record for their interaction already. It was frustrating to have a perfect opportunity presented on a silver platter while being unable to take it. Yet, he could do nothing to bridge the gap.

Unfortunately, without his input leading the conversation in an advantageous direction, Grian couldn't use a single bit of this as evidence.

There remained a divide between what could be considered playful, friendly flirting for the sake of a joke, and what could be counted as romantic in nature. Scar had a history of engaging in the former, given his love of teasing remarks that he offered to everyone around him. It remained true that, until Grian could figure out definitely what the line in the sand was for this man, he wasn't able to make any progress.

What he really needed was to retreat and regroup at home. He needed Scar to quiet down with his musings for the time being and revisit them at a later date. He needed to somehow return to his mental state prior to their kiss, when he didn't overthink every little thing he did.

Overthinking – yes, *that's* what he was doing! Grian had to quit his method of taking things slow, analyzing everything. He could review once the interaction was over, but for the moment, he just needed to get out alive.

And there *was* actually a beneficial element in him insisting on a friendly atmosphere between the two of them. Should he continue this conversation casually, and should Scar continue to steer it back in a flirtatious direction anyway, then it had to imply some interference of an outside goal.

Regular conversation. Grian could definitely manage that. He'd done it for months already.

He opened his mouth, finally ready to respond, but Scar cut him off with a sigh.

"Sorry, Doctor," he said, leaning back and out of Grian's personal space. He crossed his arms over his chest, closing off his previously-open body language and tossing aside the interest in his expression. "I know you're probably a busy man outside of your job. I'll leave you be. It was good to see you!"

Grian could only watch as Scar picked up his basket and left the aisle, heading in the direction of the check out.

Damn it. He'd hesitated for too long.

The vet was alone, stunned and disappointed in himself. So much introspection wasted because he'd hesitated for just a second too long. Wasn't that pathetic?

At the very least, Grian's day remained endlessly free with time to return to his apartment and stew in his misery. No amount of overthinking could disrupt his flow there. Only Pearl and Maui experienced his despondency as he routinely paused mid-feeding them to think about his own failure.

It was embarrassing enough that he made sure to be thoroughly prepared for his next meeting with the other man. He had several contingency plans to fall back on should his brain turn to mush like it did at the store. Grian was determined to find out the truth.

His following encounter with his criminal companions was significantly more in line with their usual circumstances. Therefore, it was not nearly as big of a disaster as anything before it. Grian had gone over to the Bam Bunker to check on Jimmy's broken finger. The cast had gotten too loose now that the swelling had gone down, and Grian had already arranged for a replacement.

To get there, obviously, he had to ride in the same car as Scar. A week prior, that would've stressed him out. However, he was finding that the blindfold was actually far more useful than he'd anticipated it being.

Without Scar being able to distract him with his appearance, Grian could almost completely return to normal. All he had to do was focus on the familiar feeling of the car turning onto roads he couldn't see, and his own heartbeat threatening to tear through his ribs. He wasn't quite to the level of being comfortable enough to return very obvious jabs yet, but he *could* speak, and that was an improvement.

When a conversation started, he was able to continue it. When Scar mentioned anything regarding the night they'd robbed the bank, Grian didn't immediately jump to thinking about the feeling of warmth against his lips. When Scar was laughing at a funny joke and he reached over and playfully hit Grian's shoulder, the vet barely even felt mortified by the blush creeping up the back of his neck.

They arrived not long after, and went inside.

There was, as could be expected from any dealing with the Bamboozlers, a bit of worrying back and forth at first. Nothing that made the vet's blood pressure spike, but certainly enough to kickstart his heart again.

Lizzie got into his personal space, blue eyes flashing as she scowled over her mask. “Scar showed you his face, huh?”

“Oh, come off it, Liz,” Jimmy sighed, pulling her away. “It was obviously only a matter of time before we all did that, anyway. He knows everything else about us.”

It was *not* obvious to Grian. Never once had he considered that they might reveal their identities to him under circumstances that were not life or death – but the vet was used to being several steps behind these people. Words like obvious meant something completely different to them.

Lizzie huffed, pausing her tough act to let her shoulders sag. “But why did Scar get to it so early? I wanted to make it more of an event.”

“Trust me,” Grian scoffed. He pushed past to start towards the kitchen table, where he could get out his supplies. “It was plenty eventful when we were lying straight to a hero’s face.”

He pointedly did *not* mention their kiss. If that was to be revealed to the Bamboozlers, it was going to have to come from Scar’s mouth. The man seemed not to have told them about it prior to his meeting them, as he definitely would’ve been teased the second he stepped into the bunker if they knew.

“Well, *some* people don’t enjoy keeping secrets as much as others,” Jimmy retorted, crossing his arms over his chest as the three trailed after Grian. “By the way, you still have yet to tell us who the mystery guy in your phone is. I don’t suppose you’d be more keen to share now that your closest confidante is here.”

Grian tensed, head whipping around to face Lizzie, who was avoiding

eye contact.

She hadn't told them?

He was *certain* she was setting up to do exactly that when he'd left on the day he learned her name. It'd been *weeks* since then!

Both Jimmy and Scar were looking between the two of them, as if trying to deduce whatever they could from the silent conversation. The vet wasn't worried, though. There was no chance they could guess the insanity that was Lizzie's year long fling with her enemy.

"That's right," Scar said proudly. "We *know* you told Grian all your secrets. C'mon, Liz, spill the beans! You have to!"

"I don't *have* to do anything," the stubborn woman grumbled. Jimmy took her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Lizzie," he whined. "We won't judge you if you've got a crush or whatever! It's only a little bit embarrassing to be whipped for some stranger we've never met before."

"*You* cannot lecture me," Lizzie snapped back, gesturing to Jimmy. "You are literally wearing Tango's hoodie right now."

Jimmy jumped back like he'd been slapped, arms coming up to cover his torso. His ears turned pink and he was stunned into silence. He had to open and close his mouth multiple times before managing a squeaky, "It's perfectly *normal* to share clothes as roommates!"

Grian raised a brow at this reaction, intrigue spiked. The hoodie, under closer inspection, didn't actually seem like something Jimmy would own of his own accord. It was rust colored, with flame decals along the sleeves and drawstrings that had very clearly been chewed on often. He'd never so much as seen Jimmy fidget with the drawstrings on his clothing, so it would add up that he was not the original owner of this item.

A separate detail caught his attention. Specifically, the way to which this person, whose name Grian had never before heard, was referred. It was almost as if this fellow were involved romantically with Jimmy. Only one person had been talked about with the same language.

"So," he started, tucking his hands into his pockets. "Zip is actually called Tango?"

Two heads whipped around to face him – Lizzie being the exception, as she seemed adamant on not meeting his eyes still. Scar and Jimmy, however, looked horrified. *"Lizzie!"*

"Relax. It's not a secret," she groaned. "Those three buffoons have accidentally said each other's names so often on live television that their personal social media accounts are linked at the bottom of their wiki pages. The Agency basically keeps them around for entertainment purposes nowadays."

Grian simultaneously absolutely could and definitely couldn't believe what he was hearing. On one hand, how could any villain be that clumsy with their personal information. On the other hand, these were the Tuff Guys. It was always within the realm of possibility for them.

Still, he hung his head and sighed. "Tim, do you *seriously* have feelings for someone like that?"

“Liz, please tell me your guy is better,” Scar agreed, making a face. “I can’t handle another idiot-in-law.”

Grian bit back a wince. Instead, he managed to catch Lizzie’s eye for the first time since they’d breached this topic. She seemed anxious, visibly contemplative. He did his best to put on an encouraging expression, and it appeared to work. Lizzie straightened the slightest bit.

“Grian, do you, uh,” she said, pointing vaguely in a direction down the hall. “Think you could step out for a moment?”

“No problem,” Grian assured her, even though stepping out was kind of the opposite of what he’d been brought to the base to do. Jimmy’s cast still needed his attention eventually. It could wait a bit longer, though. This discussion was overdue. Besides, at the very least, if he was in the base while she told them, then he could listen through the door to make sure she *actually did it this time.*

God, for a bunch of criminals, they really were all cowards when it came to romance.

Assuming, of course, that his tests proved true eventually. If it turned out Scar wasn’t lying about his reason for kissing Grian, then he would retract this internal statement.

Feeling too uncomfortable to actually go into anyone’s rooms while he waited, Grian opted to duck into the bathroom for the time being. It was decorated according to an extremely stereotypical ocean-theme. Everything was a shade of blue, white, or covered in some form of seashell.

The icing on top was the collage of photos on the wall, though. They'd very clearly bought specific frames that were designed for families to document trips taken together, each with little cheesy quotes engraved along the edges. The only problem was that they had never taken the display photos out of the frames, so random stock images watched Grian as he entered the room. Not a single one was personalized.

He noticed that one of the Bamboozlers had left their costume hanging on the back of the door. Presumably, it was either Scar or Jimmy, since Lizzie's outfit had shorts instead of long pants. These clothes also had a couple of tears in them, some of which had obviously been recently sewn back together.

In fact, there was a sewing kit left out on the countertop. Grian peeked at it, and was surprised that Jimmy's name was written on the top. He hadn't known that Jimmy, of all people, was the person in charge of fixing their costumes whenever they got messed up. It definitely painted an interesting picture in his mind's eye.

Putting that aside, the conversation had started outside. He leaned against the door, eager for any amount of muffled talking that could be picked up from where he lingered. Not much of it was audible, but he did hear the exact moment Lizzie let the information slip. He could tell because of the way both Jimmy and Scar's voices had raised about twelve octaves out of shock.

"Furioso? *Seriously?"*

"A *hero,* Liz?"

"A whole *year?"*

They were certainly loud about their responses. Neither Scar nor

Jimmy sounded particularly *angry,* though. Just surprised. Which, all things considered, wasn't the worst, especially since she'd put it off for so long. The Bamboozlers wouldn't be easily broken apart.

There was a lot more chattering. A couple of times, Grian thought he heard his name. Still, he didn't leave until he was certain they were calling specifically for him. When he returned to the room, it was quiet.

Lizzie looked relieved, and she greeted Grian with a nod of confirmation. It was over, and it had gone well. The two remaining were clearly processing, taking things slow, but the vet had been in their shoes. He knew what was running through their heads.

Grian figured he might as well get down to business while they recovered. And it didn't take much longer. Though no one touched that newly-learned piece of information again, they did resume idle conversation.

Jimmy was a good patient, sitting still and just mildly complaining as his injury was disturbed. The vet kept his gaze firmly on the cast, stopping only to reach into his own bag from time to time. His extra focus definitely *wasn't* because he could feel eyes on the back of his head, and he definitely *didn't* fear his own reaction should he look up and see exactly who he thought he'd see. That simply couldn't be the case.

He distracted himself with his practice, only letting his attention wander if it was for the sake of analyzing the state of the people around him. Grian usually did that immediately upon spotting them, but he'd been interrupted earlier. Now that he was really looking, it was easy to see that Lizzie and Jimmy had rough experiences with their bank heist the other day. Each of them was layered with bruises, and they had zip-up sweaters tied around their waists that could be shrugged on to hide the evidence.

Jimmy got the worst of it, of course, since he couldn't fight back. Grian did remember being a little surprised that he'd gone along with the heist while he wasn't at his best, but when asked, the Bamboozlers simply said that timing was important. The date they picked apparently aligned with some inspection or whatever — nothing that Grian was particularly concerned about. He just accepted the answer, and moved on.

As soon as he was done, and Jimmy's finger was no longer in a badly-sized cast, it didn't take long for Grian to *lose* his ability to focus on other things. Lizzie's difficult topic had been broached, all details related to medical work had already been covered, and the trio had tired of teasing each other. There was no other distraction from the ache in his chest.

He'd done a great job of putting his feelings on the back burner for as long as he could, and now, they insisted on being acknowledged.

Scar was, unfortunately, still as upsettingly beautiful as ever once Grian finished packing away his things.

Turning around to see him standing nearby with his arms crossed over his chest, made worse by the fact that he was wearing a sleeveless tank top, was not doing much to maintain a breathable atmosphere in that bunker. Grian was halfway tempted to ask Lizzie to blind him to remove the worst of his problems.

It was weird, if he was being honest, noticing someone else's looks. Grian supposed he'd always done that to a degree when it came to Scar — spending far too long staring into his eyes or at the curve of his back — but then, it had been closer to aesthetic attraction than anything noticeably deeper. Who *wasn't* capable of appreciating a nice figure every now and again? He was inept when it came to emotions, but he had taste.

This was different from all of that, though. This was warmer. This was more delicate. This was tedious and thrilling all at the same time, and this was specific only to one man.

Obviously, he'd harbored these feelings for a while, tamped them down in light of this man being an infamous villain, and the reality of a vet liking a criminal being *really* strange. They'd been simmering beneath the surface, building in strength, value, genuine affection the longer he continued to push them down.

His judgement had been fogged by his own biases against the struggles of a relationship that could emerge between two people like them, but they were clearer as of late. At least, inwardly they were clearer, even if he didn't yet understand how to communicate them outwardly. They made sense to him.

Of course he'd fall for the guy that was just his type, with a soft spot for animals and a pension for jokes. Of course he would repress it out of fear. Of course it'd eventually overflowed as his heart kept swelling. Of course these feelings would lead him here, to this man, no matter how horribly he screwed it up over and over again.

And it didn't really matter to him that Scar was a villain. Not anymore.

He'd seen Lizzie's face when she talked about her hero boyfriend — seen how something so difficult could still bring her so much joy. She struggled to admit it to her team in the same way that Grian struggled to admit it to himself, but that didn't make it any less prominent, any less worthy of exploration.

His willingness to throw everything aside to pursue this avenue he'd

only just realized existed was terrifying in its own right. But it was the only thing he could do, the only thing that he wanted, the only way to ensure he lived with as few regrets as possible.

"Alright," he said, pulling his bag over his shoulder and facing the others. "I'll be on my way then. Scar?"

Scar didn't need to be told twice. Grian was blindfolded, escorted outside, and carefully helped into the car. The entire time, he was aware of Scar's hand in his, honeyed tone in his ear, directing him as best he could to make the process easier.

The drive was tense, somehow, despite the lack of visibility. Grian could feel Scar thinking from across the center console. It only took a few minutes for it to become tangible enough for the vet to blurt, "What is it?"

"Well," Scar started, voice coming out as a gasp, as though he'd been holding his breath while also holding his tongue. "I was just… I wasn't expecting Furioso, and I was wondering–"

"Wondering what I thought about the whole thing?" Grian guessed. Scar hummed in confirmation, and the vet shrugged. It was a difficult question. "Your group politics are none of my business. I was surprised, but you should've seen her after she talked to him over the phone that day. It was like she was a completely normal person. She really likes him."

There was no response to that. Grian didn't know what exactly had been told to the Bamboozlers. Presumably, it was more than he would ever really know. Maybe that was enough to warrant this concern from Scar, or maybe they were working with the same amount of details, and maybe he was just taking longer to understand.

Which prompted an interesting question.

“Scar?”

“Yeah, G?”

“Do you dislike the idea of two people from completely different walks of life dating one another?”

He felt the car give a jerk. They must’ve come up on a stoplight a little too fast or something. Scar cleared his throat, and the drive resumed regularly. “No, no. I don’t mind. Not at all. Why, uh… Why do you ask?”

Grian did not miss the stammering. In fact, his ears honed in on it – the sound immediately pulling a pathetic *thump* from his heart. He realized after having asked the question that it *technically* applied to the two of them as well. A civilian and a villain were only a few degrees of separation from a villain and a hero in those regards.

And Scar wasn’t against it.

Scar was *adamantly* not against it.

Something akin to confidence formed in his lungs, swelling in his chest, and buzzing through his veins. An idea came to him – one formed after significant observation had recognized a pattern in his companion’s behaviors. He didn’t need to be able to see to know what to do next.

Grian found himself moving suddenly, lifting his arm and resting it against the center console. Exactly as he'd expected, Scar was *also* resting his arm in that spot. Their skin brushed, and Grian thought he heard a breath sucked in through clenched teeth. Scar didn't move, but he was obviously aware of the vet.

"Then, if you don't have a problem with it," Grian said, slow and quiet. "What's holding you back?"

He could've cut the silence that immediately filtered in with a knife. Scar was tense beside him, unable to respond.

Grian had done it. Sure, he was still hindered by the blindfold, and therefore lacking the ability to track redness in the face or anything of the sort, but it was progress.

After Scar failed to respond for another minute, Grian decided to return them to their topic to relieve him of any inner stress he might be experiencing. As addicting as it was to know that his words could hold such power in this moment, he was satisfied.

"Lizzie and Furioso will be alright. They're a year in," Grian commented. "They've resolved most of the bugs in a relationship like that. I'm not saying it won't be hard, but Lizzie has you guys behind her now. And, hey, if Furioso breaks her heart, I doubt she's above just killing him right then and there. She's not helpless."

Scar laughed weakly at that. "No, she isn't. I should be more worried about Furioso."

"Yeah, probably," Grian hummed. He liked the sound of the smile in

Scar's voice. It kept him happy until they reached the end of their drive. The blindfold was removed, and Grian let his eyes adjust to the light.

To his surprise, when he finally glanced in Scar's direction, the other man's face was completely pink. His smile was tight, and he was blinking really fast when he met Grian's eyes. "Bye, Doctor. Get home safely."

"Oh," Grian whispered, taking in the sight greedily. This was *his* doing. That expression was because of what *Grian* had said to him. Scar looked like that, and it was *his fault.*

And wasn't that a beautiful realization? Such a small comment, phrased in such a vague way, and yet, his companion was *still* dwelling on it minutes later. Grian saw himself echoed in those mannerisms.

"Goodbye, Scar," he said, a smile spreading slowly over his face. Grian stood and got out of the car, in desperate need of a walk to get rid of all this newfound energy. "I'll see you soon."

"Yeah," Scar replied, barely audible. "Hopefully."

Grian tossed him a wink, and closed the door. He began to walk away, pausing only to check over his shoulder. Scar was resting his forehead against the steering wheel, taking deep breaths. A thrill shot down the vet's spine. He left without a second thought.

With an aspect of evidence gathered, he had quite a lot to contemplate at home.

Not much happened in the time after his last visit to the Bam Bunker.

Five days went by with little to no criminal activity on the news, and the clinic wasn't particularly busy either. The Tuff Guys had tried and failed to interrupt a charity event at the local university, but they'd been chased off campus by a collection of overly-passionate college students, so that hadn't amounted to much.

The Bamboozlers, having just finished their big heist, only went out every now and again for little things. They hadn't gotten hurt, or really encountered any heroes at all. Scar told Grian over text that they were planning on scouting for a new project, and keeping the city on their toes with occasional appearances. Nothing had seriously caught their fancy yet.

They weren't due to go on any dangerous missions for a while. The trio was supposed to be fine, staying off the Agency's radars, and only taking on easy tasks. He'd settled in, content to not have much action for a while longer.

So, after a quiet night watching a mindless movie, Grian hadn't been expecting a knock on his window.

It wasn't often that he received knocks of any kind at all as of late, unless they were on his front door and far less hurried. The Bamboozlers knew they were welcome in his apartment. There was no need to sneak in for a casual visit or a basic check-up.

This frantic rapping, however, was neither in the place he expected, nor for a leisurely matter. Grian was appalled to reach his window and find Scar sprawled out on the landing of the fire escape, waiting for him.

The vet threw open the window and climbed out to join him, taking in his pale features. Scar was clad in the expected Ringmaster regalia, gas mask and all. Through the costume, it was hard to get a solid read on him, but it was immediately clear that something was wrong. There was blood, and the sound of wheezing breaths. He couldn't yet see the source of his pain from this angle, though.

"Grian," the other man rasped as soon as the vet was in sight. Grian dropped to his knees beside him, putting a hand to his pulse, feeling the slow pace of his heart. His breathing was also concerningly shallow. "Please… let's go inside."

"Yes, of course," Grian whispered, simultaneously shocked and horrifically present. "Stay with me. Deep breaths. Stay conscious."

It was obvious that the guy wasn't capable of walking on his own, since he'd barely made it to the window before collapsing. They'd encountered the same problem in the alleyway all those months ago. It scared him to see his companion in a similar state now. He needed to be treated without delay.

Scar was still bigger than him, so lifting him completely wasn't possible without risking throwing out his back. Luckily, the primary difference was that his patient wasn't dead weight this time around. Grian dealt with large animals frequently, and while it wasn't necessarily comparable to a well-built human, he'd have enough strength to manage. He just needed a little assistance from the other to get there.

Grian helped Scar into a sitting position, and slung his arm over his shoulder. They maneuvered his legs underneath him, gradually pushing for a standing position. Getting Scar through the window was the worst part. Grian had to scrape his side against the frame to prevent his friend from being bruised in his place.

The second they were fully indoors, rather unceremoniously, Scar collapsed to the ground. His body made a loud *thud,* which earned a wince from the vet. He hadn't meant to let him fall, but there was very little choice from their current positioning. Once the window was closed and locked again, he did his best to get Scar onto the couch.

Grian didn't stop to survey the other man for wounds. He already knew from his complexion that he couldn't mess around. The vet sprinted to his coat closet and dug through it until he found what he was looking for – the IV from months prior.

He'd never quite figured out how to return it to the hospital without being accused of theft, so the Bamboozlers had just stowed it away here. Thankfully, there was also a single remaining bag of IV fluids. It wouldn't work forever, but it would be a good short-term solution.

Unfortunately, Grian didn't have any oxygen tanks. The spares of those, leftover from when Jimmy had panicked and ordered fifteen online during Lizzie's brief duration of needing one, remained at the bunker.

"Okay," he panted, rushing back to Scar's side with the gathered stuff, all too aware of how out of shape he'd gotten recently. While he hooked the drip up to his friend's arm, he asked, "What's happened? Where does it hurt?"

"My side," Scar rasped. He shifted to allow Grian to lean in, pulling up his shirt to reveal the wound that had been hidden earlier. The vet expected a bloody mess – the result of another embedded projectile or deep stab wound. He could not have prepared himself for what waited there instead.

Grian squinted, a little confused.

Scar *had* indeed been injured, but it wasn't anywhere near fatal, or even dangerous.

"Scar," he said slowly, pausing his fussing. "You are just as capable of cleaning up small cuts as I am. If you wanted an excuse to hang out, you could've called me. What's with all the dramatics?"

The man's side boasted a decently-sized cut, which was bleeding, but not an immense amount. It wasn't deep enough to puncture, or even leave much of a mark during the healing process. A normal person would be worried, but compared to the possible other injuries they often sustained, this was the kind of thing a villain could simply clean, bandage, and forget about.

"No, Grian," Scar gasped. He propped himself up on one elbow, using his other hand to reach over and squeeze the vet's shoulder. His eyes were glassy, like he was holding back tears. "It's not a cut. This is different. It's *worse."*

"Worse?"

Grian searched his friend's face, trying to garner meaning from his words. He took in the situation again, reassessing his original observation of pale skin, with an additional note towards Scar's ragged breathing, general weakness, and outward panic.

None of those symptoms should've been the result of a regular scrape. They were severe – enough to panic him before he'd seen the injury itself. Had he never laid eyes on it, he would've continued to treat it as something potentially life-threatening. His intuition knew better than to let what he saw get in the way of his instincts.

“Who did this to you, Scar?”

His friend collapsed down onto the cushions again, a pained groan leaving his throat. Grian finished attaching the IV, but it didn’t ease any of his concern.

“I was shot,” Scar said. He was interrupted by a coughing fit, and had to quickly remove his mask to shove his face into his sleeve. Grian didn’t like the dull color of his lips. “One of Necromancer’s arrows caught my side while I was scouting.”

“Necromancer?”

Grian knew that hero.

They were another member of the Gs, alongside Morphling. She was known for her ability to briefly possess a person’s mind and control them for up to thirty seconds. Though it was a strong power, it couldn’t be used often enough to change the tides of a fight on its own. To make up for that gap, they had a compound bow strapped to their back.

Scar nodded. “But something was… off about the arrows she used tonight. I can’t describe it.”

“Off?”

A nasty idea clawed to the front of Grian’s brain. He drew in a sharp breath, recounting the symptoms again and again. To his utmost

displeasure, they aligned scarily well with what he suspected to be the cause. The vet's eyes drifted to the wound, terrified by the angry red of the skin surrounding it.

A pit formed in his gut.

"The arrows were poisoned," Grian whispered.

Scar blanched, eyes growing wide. "What? Poisoned?"

"Stay calm," the vet advised. He disappeared to grab his other supplies and returned as fast as he could. "It's probably just the kind that's meant to… incapacitate you for a while."

"But I wasn't incapacitated," Scar said, clenching his teeth as a tremor shook his body. Not a good sign. "I finished the fight and came to you. Pretty slow-acting incapacitation drug if that was their goal."

"Maybe because you were only cut," Grian guessed. He began cleaning the area. "If it'd been a puncture wound, or maybe even a slightly larger injury, you probably would've been temporarily paralyzed."

At least, Grian *hoped* that was what he was dealing with.

He wasn't a physician, nor had he the slightest clue how to handle something of this caliber. Alcohol poisoning, snake venom, and bad reactions to food and medicine in animals were about the closest he could get, but he couldn't imagine they were even the same genre. Stomach pumping was unlikely to work against a poison in the blood.

He hadn't even thought to *research* stuff like this. It hadn't even registered in his mind as a possible threat for villains to experience. Not that anyone could blame him. This was beyond bizarre.

Suddenly, he recalled a report from a newscaster awhile back, stating that the heroes were taking necessary steps. They'd all brushed it off then as nothing of concern. Staring down at Scar now, though, proved they had been dead wrong.

God, the Agency had to be more than a little peeved about the recent robbery if they'd greenlit literal poison-tipped arrows. It was a cruel tactic, meant to cause suffering no matter the severity of the injury. The mere notion made him sick.

Maybe, beneath the surface, the heroes *weren't* as merciful as a regular veterinarian once viewed them to be. Maybe this wasn't about incapacitation at all. Maybe they *would* jump at the chance to kill off one of their biggest nuisances.

"Oh, man," Scar gasped. He sat up suddenly, moving like he might try to leave. "I have to warn the others. I have to tell them to watch out for–"

He was interrupted by another coughing fit and a wave of dizziness that visibly crossed his eyes. Grian gently pushed him back down, tutting. "You're not going anywhere, idiot. Use your watch instead."

"Right, yeah, you're right," Scar stammered. He raised his watch to his mouth and spoke into it. "Guys, arrows are poisoned. Don't get shot."

With that message delivered, he dropped his hand unceremoniously, and then Grian watched his eyes roll back into his head. Scar passed out instantly, slumping against the couch.

The vet startled, lurching forward to check his pulse and his breathing. His airways didn't seem to be blocked. His heart rate was also not terrible. Both were, of course, fainter than he might've liked for a healthy person, but Scar wasn't taking a nosedive, so that was all he could really ask for. Most likely, he'd just passed out from the pain.

Grian sat back, taking stock of the situation.

Whatever poison had been in those arrows was obviously stronger than a sedative. It left the wound angry, and Scar's body a wreck. Grian felt helpless. He didn't know how to do more than treat the symptoms he was seeing.

The vet did what he could, finishing up his cleaning. He used warm water and soap, washed it thoroughly, and wrapped it once he was done. Whether his friend was immediately at risk of death or not, Scar was clearly in bad shape, and only declining as the minutes passed. Tremors shook him often, and he let out more than a couple unconscious groans. He'd begun to sweat heavily too.

Grian stayed by his side, anxiously tracking the uneven rise and fall of his chest. He only deviated when a knock came at his front door. The vet answered, relieved to see Lizzie and Jimmy in their civilian outfits waiting for him on the other side, although that quickly shifted into shock.

They weren't wearing their masks.

The other two Bamboozlers stared at him, eyes wild and mouths agape to suck in air, looking like their world was crumbling at their feet with each second that passed.

“Is he here?” Lizzie asked as she pushed past him. She had a piercing, one little silver stud on the side of her nose. “Is Scar here?”

“Uh, yes,” he responded, dazed at the sight of her full worried expression on display. Jimmy waited in the doorway, giving Grian a weak smile. “Why aren’t you two–?”

“We couldn’t risk being spotted on our way over,” Jimmy explained. He had a light dusting of freckles over his cheeks. “We changed and came as soon as we heard Scar’s warning. His tracker told us you had him, but we were scared.”

“Right,” Grian whispered. “Come in, then.”

He allowed Jimmy inside, and he joined Lizzie as they looked over the edge of the couch at Scar. Both of them were frowning, mouths downturned and brows furrowed. Seeing it all at once almost made Grian dizzy.

He kind of forgot that they had a lower half to their heads that wasn’t just a mask. The entirety made sense, but it was yet another adjustment that he’d have to get used to over time. He hated that it’d happened under these circumstances.

After a minute, Jimmy spoke up, “What’s wrong with him, G? Is it actually poison?”

“That’s my best guess,” Grian confirmed, nodding. He walked around to the side table, where he’d set up a clean cloth and a bowl of water. Lightly, he began to dab the sweat from his friend’s face.

Lizzie chimed in next, “Is he going to be alright?”

Grian stopped, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I’ll do what I can. Poison isn’t something that can be… completely cured with my skill set.”

“What?” Lizzie straightened, eyes going wide. “You can’t help him?”

“No, I mean I can’t make it go away instantly,” Grian said, flinching under her terrified gaze. “I don’t know anything about this poison, or how much this one cut will affect him.”

Jimmy and Lizzie shared a look, anxiety visible. Guilt chipped at Grian, knowing the same fears had taken root within him as well. He wished there were more he could do immediately. Seeing the tension in Scar’s body, the pain written clearly over his features, made Grian want to crawl in a hole and never come out.

It was *weird* feeling helpless in this situation. Countless other times, Lizzie, Scar, and Jimmy had all been in equally dangerous situations. Any number of stab wounds, or stray arrows could’ve put them into a state like this one.

But they hadn’t, because Grian knew what to do there. He knew how to clean infections, stitch up slashes, and create makeshift casts. For the first time, Grian could only do so much. The majority of the healing process would rely on Scar’s own ability to gradually purge himself of the toxins.

The vet wondered if things would be different if the arrow had worked as intended. Were Scar to be captured and brought back to the Agency, would they have administered an antidote? Or would they have left him to suffer – rotting, and perhaps even dying inside a

prison cell?

Would they have bothered to bring him to the Agency at all? With an arrow buried in his flesh, and a poison of unknown levels of danger seeping into his blood, would they have bothered to take him away, or would they have left him to fade in the middle of the street?

That was too brutal to dwell on for long. It hadn't happened. Scar had only been sliced. He shook himself out of his depressing stupor, turning to the other two. "I'll need to keep an eye on him for the foreseeable future. He can stay here, in my bed."

"How long do you think it'll take?" Jimmy knelt down beside Scar, tentatively touching his hand.

"I don't know," Grian replied honestly. "Poison is… tricky. Scar is strong, though, and otherwise physically healthy. He'll do better than most people would have under the same circumstances."

Lizzie sighed, eyes hazy, "Can *we* do anything?"

"Well, it'd be nice to have someone around to monitor his condition while I'm at work," Grian said, resuming his gentle wiping of sweat. "And more fluids, as well as Lizzie's old oxygen mask would be beyond helpful."

Jimmy took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll fetch the tank right now. Liz, can you handle the fluids?"

"Consider it done," she promised, such conviction in her words that Grian couldn't doubt her for a second. Neither of them were going to

sit idly by while their teammate suffered. Lizzie looked down at Grian, opening her mouth as if to say more, and then stopping. She shook her head, and settled for, “Keep him alive.”

Grian nodded. They left, and he remained by Scar’s side.

The world was heavy upon his shoulders. The pulsing of a life was featherlight beneath his hands. The figure of death crept through his friend’s blood. The apartment was quiet.

Grian remained.

Grian hung his coat on the rack, kicking his shoes off beside the door. The air as they’d gotten into the start of autumn was beginning to descend upon the city. The chilliness of the evenings lasted longer into the days, and the nights came sooner than Grian would’ve liked.

It was warm in his apartment, though. Pearl and Maui rushed to greet him as soon as he stepped foot in the living room. They mewled and flicked their tails, making their irritation known to the world. He sighed, “Did you guys not enjoy spending time with Lizzie? She’s very nice, I promise.”

“Grian? Is that you?”

“Yes, coming!” Grian followed the sound of Lizzie’s voice down the hall and into his bedroom. The door was already open, with a familiar woman waiting inside. Lizzie smiled at him. Her eyes were, as always, dull and puffy from crying. Three days had not improved her state.

Scar was asleep on the bed, as per usual. Grian's gaze dragged over him, finding nothing had changed. He was still perspiring, though not quite as much as that first night, and his face was perpetually red.

Grian asked, "Did he wake up while I was out?"

"Unfortunately, yeah," Lizzie sighed. "I gave him some of that activated charcoal medicine stuff like you told me to, but he passed out again before I could see if it was working."

Grian nodded solemnly, understanding her disappointment. Scar's moments of consciousness were brief and painful, not something either of his three caretakers particularly enjoyed witnessing. He'd experience heart palpitations, abnormal breathing, and he'd vomited a few times over the course of several nights.

The vet stepped over to check the heart rate monitor – which Jimmy had stolen for him recently against his wishes. It'd tracked several uneven spikes, all of which had leveled out when Scar presumably lost consciousness earlier. Not pleasant, but at the very least, his condition had reached what they presumed to be rock bottom, stopping him from getting any weaker.

Grian didn't let himself think about how easily one bad reaction could ruin everything while he was like this.

"Thanks, Liz," Grian said, dragging a hand through his hair. It was gross after his long shift, and his scrubs were in need of a wash too. "Feel free to head out. I've got him from here."

"You sure?" Lizzie replied. "You look tired."

“Don’t worry about me,” Grian insisted. “Jellie’s probably missing out on human interaction by now, and Pearl and Maui won’t let me feed them until you’re gone.”

“Always worried about the cats,” the woman grumbled. “You and Scar really are well suited for each other.”

Grian didn’t have the energy recently to care about those types of little jabs. The only thing they did was remind him of how badly Scar was doing. Only a week prior, he could’ve laughed at that. A week prior, his heart would’ve given a flutter. A week prior, that comment would’ve made both him *and* Scar blush.

Now, they were lucky if they received even the slightest reaction from their friend at all.

Lizzie stood from her chair and exited the room. The sole farewell she offered was a pat on the shoulder. None of them bothered with pleasantries during these switches. From down the hall, he heard the door open and shut. It was locked with the spare key he’d given to both her and Jimmy.

Pearl and Maui galloped into the room right on cue. Neither of them cared about Scar’s faint presence, too busy weaving through their owner’s feet to mind. They probably couldn’t even tell there was another body occupying their space.

Grian let some of the day’s tension roll off his shoulders. He was exhausted, more than he’d like to admit, but that would have to wait. There was more to be done.

He fed his cats, checked on Scar once again, then opted to take a shower. Grian was anxious about stepping away for too long, but he wasn't the type to be capable of standing poor hygiene for long. He did his best to make it short.

Grian returned not ten minutes later, his room quiet aside from the beeping of the heart monitor and the hiss of the oxygen mask. Scar was unmoving. The room was cold. The lights were dim.

The vet settled himself in the chair beside the bed. He tossed his towel in the vague direction of his laundry basket, and just watched the rise and fall of Scar's chest. Somewhere in the apartment, his phone rang with Mumbo's usual ringtone. Grian let it go to voicemail.

He leaned forward, propping one arm up on the bed and resting his cheek in his palm.

"I miss you, Scar," Grian whispered, words falling upon deaf ears. The vet let his hand find Scar's own. It was limp, clammy, but it was still his. He swallowed past a lump in his throat and squeezed. A week ago, he would've gotten a squeeze in return. "Please. Come back to me."

Scar did not respond. Scar could not respond.

Grian was completely alone.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for 85K hits and for all the support on these last few chapters! It's really gotten me through!
>
> As for the important announcement that was mentioned at the beginning of the chapter - there will NOT be an update next week. I am going out of the country tomorrow and I'll be gone for

a while without much access to the internet. I'll communicate more on social media and my discord as I figure stuff out. Again, NO UPDATE NEXT WEEK.

AND REMINDER TO TAG YOUR SPOILERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

As always, much love is due to my beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! And the link to join my discord server is right here!

I'll see you closer to July 15th!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> WELCOME BACK! Here's 11.9k words as an apology for me not updating last week. It means we're officially over 100k words as the total fic length - Very exciting!
>
> Please enjoy the following chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grian watched the microwave spin, its light illuminating the otherwise darkened kitchen around him. A hum broke through steady silence, occupying space that was far too empty on its own. The timer counted down achingly slowly, a lethargic minute turning into creeping seconds, and then, after an eternity, finally reached zero. Its hum was replaced by a shrill beep, so near and yet so far from that of the heart monitor in the other room.

He didn't grab his food immediately. His arms were tired, and he was comfortable with a hip propped against the counter. A stillness had overtaken him, one that was not easily disturbed by loud noises or timers or the smell of a pathetic reheated dinner after a long shift. All he could find the strength to do was listen to his surroundings — the intake of his own breath, the hush of the oxygen machine, and the pitter patter of two small cats coming to check on their owner.

He glanced down at Maui and Pearl, looping through his legs to stare up at him. They didn't mewl or call out, didn't try to rouse him into action when they knew he'd been incapable of it for days. Feeding them and sitting in their presence was the most he could manage.

The microwave's light gave up, as if sensing he couldn't be bothered to reach for its contents. His kitchen was plunged into darkness. Feeble moonlight filtered through half-drawn curtains. Only a singular window remained unlocked, stuck that way after Grian had tried and failed to find the willpower to clean the bloodstains off his fire escape.

Scar had been unconscious for a week.

A week since he'd dragged himself, trembling and fading, into the vet's apartment. A week since he'd spoken his last coherent sentence. A week since he'd been safe and healthy and *alive.*

Grian hung his head, hunger pains squeezing his stomach. He had to eat — he knew he did. His limbs were heavy, eyes drooping, energy dipping, but he had to eat.

Jimmy had left a little while ago, when Grian returned home from a fourteen hour shift sometime after midnight. It wasn't a horrible day at the clinic — with a couple of emergency procedures at the beginning that tapered off as the evening ticked on. He was able to put his feet up occasionally, but it wasn't satisfying. Typically, once he had finished a shift like that, he would come home and crash under his covers.

But there was no reprieve to be found in his home.

He couldn't fall into bed, because a familiar face was still waiting there for him, with a thousand little things that needed to be done. There was medicine to give him, sheets to change, diagnostics to check, IV bags to replace, oxygen tanks to switch out, bandages to tie, animals to feed, and any number of extra tasks depending on how much Jimmy or Lizzie had done. Then, and only then, could Grian begin to think of himself.

Which did not, in all honesty, work out as well as he needed it to.

To say he was tired was an understatement. It wasn't uncommon for

him to forgo eating just to doze off faster, or in favor of helping Scar through one of his fits of consciousness.

Tonight though, despite his pathetic nature, his body wasn't keen on walking away without some semblance of nutrients.

Grian forced himself to open the microwave and remove his bowl of ramen. It was still warm, but not enough to burn his hands after the long wait. The noodles would undoubtedly be chewy by now. He sighed, mixing in the prepackaged flavoring and letting it sit for a bit.

Suddenly, a loud cry echoed from down the hall. Grian was off without a second thought, bursting into his bedroom and taking in the situation.

Scar was awake, eyes wide and chest heaving. His heart monitor was shrieking, and his oxygen mask had sent him into a coughing fit. Grian was by his side in an instant, helping him sit up and rubbing his back while he choked on air.

"It's okay," he whispered. "I'm here. You'll be alright."

His words fell upon deaf ears. Scar began to claw at his mask, so Grian helped him get it off. On instinct, used to this dance, the vet reached behind him and grabbed the tiny trash can. He placed it in front of Scar, then dragged his fingers through his hair to keep it out of his face. It wasn't terribly long, but it could still be inconvenient in moments such as these.

Immediately, he heard the unpleasantness of stomach acid being heaved into the bin. Nothing substantial, as no food stayed down long when they did succeed in getting Scar to eat at all, but enough to be uncomfortable.

“Let it out,” Grian sighed. He heard a choked out sob between gags, and felt his heart shrivel alongside it. He readjusted his hands so that one could hold his hair and the other could rub circles into Scar’s back. “Don’t panic. This is fine. It’s totally natural.”

A minute later, Scar was finished. They stayed like that for a while, simultaneously to ensure it wasn’t going to happen anymore, and because Grian knew his friend ached severely with every large movement. Eventually, though, the vet reached over and pried the trash can out of Scar’s white-knuckled grip. He replaced it instantly with a cloth, wiping at his mouth.

“There we go,” Grian hummed. “All better. How do you feel?”

Scar didn’t acknowledge him. It was clear by the haze in his eyes that he was barely conscious. Grian helped him down again, and with a minor amount of maneuvering, managed to get him on his side. Changing his positioning was important to prevent bed rashes. The oxygen mask was put on once more, and the beeping of the monitor slowed to its regular pace.

As quickly as he’d woken, Scar fell back asleep. Grian wasn’t surprised. Whatever poison remained in his system was draining and depleting all of his strength.

Grian opened his phone — an almost habitual action by now — and searched up every symptom he’d seen Scar exhibiting. And, as usual, the same several articles popped up. Nothing new, though.

He’d clicked every single one of the links, spanning the first ten pages of search results, to no avail. Not a soul on the internet could tell him what was wrong with Scar. It didn’t matter if he repeated this process

through hundreds of scholarly libraries or on any amount of less reliable forums.

He sat himself in the chair beside the bed and rested his forehead against the mattress. For the hundredth time, he wondered if his lab at the clinic would be enough to provide decent results from blood work. The conclusion was that it wasn't worth the risk — not with his limited expertise with this form of poison, and his need to keep this as secretive as possible.

Perhaps, if he had access to the arrow that had originally caused the whole mess, he could've attempted to create a sort of anti-venom. He'd treated snake bites similarly before, and the injured parties emerged alright in the end because of it.

But those were different scenarios. They were within the range of his previously-existing knowledge. They had significantly more context. They weren't half as illegal.

Their present predicament was just *odd* in every sense of the word. The internet was useless, activated charcoal was helping only minimally, and the symptoms were persisting without any sign of lessening even a week later. It was almost like this problem — this *poison* — didn't exist at all.

Grian watched Scar sleep, watched him breathe, watched him fight to stay alive. When he could watch no longer, he stood, undid the bag in the trash bin, tied it off, replaced it with a new one, and went into the kitchen. He threw it in the larger bin there, where it would be taken out to the dumpster soon.

Inadvertently, his eyes landed on the bowl on the counter. He slumped, stomach rumbling.

So much for a half-decent warm meal.

Too tired to make another, Grian reheated the ramen, and did his best not to cringe at the soggy texture while he ate. It eased some of the uncomfortability in his abdomen, enough for his fatigue to take over as a priority.

He abandoned the bowl in the sink, and returned to his room.

Grian had never seen a need to own anything more than a one-bedroom apartment for the majority of his adult life. He could afford a larger place if he really wanted to upgrade, but every time he'd begun to consider as much, he'd let his logic talk him out of it. More space meant more to clean, more to keep up with, more inconveniences.

Besides, Grian was never usually the type of person to host guests. Everyone important to him lived in the same city, all capable of going back to their own homes for any necessary naps, so why go through the trouble of having a guest room?

He regretted that now.

For the first two nights that Scar had occupied his bed, Grian had taken the couch. In that time, he learned the true level of trouble that could be caused by having a high maintenance patient in the other room. He was forced to jump up and run nearly once every three hours to tend to Scar.

And those were just the occasions in which Scar's discomfort was loud enough to be heard from the living room. Grian would discover later that his poor friend was prone to waking up for spurts of minutes at a

time solely to moan in pain, before passing out again. The vet had felt supremely guilty for not originally being by his side during those moments.

On the third night, he'd given up on walking back to the couch. When he crashed, it was on the floor beside his bed with a stupidly little pillow under his head and a thin blanket covering him.

It worked significantly better, and allowed him to be there for Scar during his rare conscious moments. His companion never had to feel anxious about his strange surroundings all alone, because Grian could be by his side in a flash to whisper reassurances and wipe perspiration from his brow until he calmed again.

Of course, Grian didn't sleep on the floor like that forever. With the help of the other two Bamboozlers, they arranged a small corner of the room with a collection of pillows and blankets, where one could sleep with only a mild chance of waking to a crick in their neck. Mostly, it was used by Grian, but Lizzie or Jimmy could also knock out there if they needed to during one of their overnight stays.

That makeshift bed was where he collapsed tonight, worn down and slightly-less hungry than usual. Too tired to fret over the lumps in his cushions or the awkward way he'd sprawled out, Grian gave in to the heaviness in his eyelids. He fell asleep to the sound of breathing and the steady beep of a consistent heart rate.

"I did my best with the sponge bath," was the first thing Jimmy said when Grian walked in. The vet set his keys down on the table beside his front door and kicked off his shoes. "He winced whenever I touched him, though, like his skin hurt or something. I think he might've gotten sicker."

“I’m not surprised,” Grian replied. He bent to pet the top of Maui’s head, earning a delighted purr in response. “He’s immunocompromised under the effects of the poison, so it makes sense he’d get a fever.”

The cats were getting better about showing themselves in front of Lizzie and Jimmy, but they weren’t totally there yet. The two were clearly far more interested in spending time with their owner than anything else. Although, only Maui met him by the door now. Pearl was not currently within view, which was strange for her. She typically liked to fuss about the intruders in her home just as much as her brother.

“Any more issues? The bath went alright otherwise?” Grian straightened, eyes scanning the room for his second cat. No trace of her.

“Yeah, all good there,” Jimmy confirmed. “He was partially conscious for most of it, obviously not speaking though. I gave him a break at one point so the sensations didn’t overwhelm him, but I’m getting better at it.”

“Thanks again, by the way,” Grian said, offering Jimmy a smile. “You’re saving me a lot of awkwardness there.”

“Of course,” Jimmy said. “We’ve known each other for years. I’ve seen him in a million more embarrassing situations. This is nothing.”

Since time continued to move along, whether everyone was within good spirits or not, the three in charge of caring for Scar had been taking more proper measures to ensure their friend was as comfortable as possible. Grian was in charge of most medical issues, as well as

primarily supervising everything. Lizzie had taken in Jellie and was routinely keeping Scar's home orderly while he was away. And though he was nonchalant about the whole ordeal, Jimmy had actually been contributing quite a lot to the cause as of late.

Mostly, he had opted to do jobs that weren't always the most pleasant. Regular baths were one of those chores, alongside helping to change Scar's clothes and whatnot whenever he was able to do so. In order for him to recover as fast as possible, Scar needed a pristine environment — meaning no dirty clothes, or gathering germs along his skin.

Had Jimmy not been around, these tasks would've fallen to Grian. The vet was confident in his own ability to get such things done as part of his job, but that didn't mean it wasn't completely welcome to be relieved of that burden. Jimmy had known Scar for longer than he was willing to admit to Grian. They'd experienced everything together over the course of several years. It was more comfortable for every party involved if he was the one that took those things on.

"Do you need anything else before I head out?" Jimmy asked out of courtesy, though he was already shrugging on his coat.

Grian thought about it, but couldn't come up with a particular task. He shook his head. "No. Do you have somewhere important to be?"

"Nothing urgent, but yeah, I do," Jimmy told him. There was a shine to his eyes and a furrow to his brows. "Tango called earlier to say he finally managed to get into that drive we recovered from the bank. He wouldn't tell me what was on it over the phone — wanted me to see it myself, I guess."

"Oh? Tango got through those security measures?" Grian perked up, not having known the speedy villain was capable of this. "Wasn't it behind some super tricky code or whatever?"

“Yeah, it was,” Jimmy said, brightening slightly and puffing up his chest. “He’s really good with all things technical, though he’d never say it to your face. Don’t tell anyone, but he’s the guy who helped us make our comms system. Designed the watches and the earpieces and we just had to steal the parts he needed.”

Grian felt a teasing smile tug upwards on the corner of his lip. “You’re quite proud of his accomplishments, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Jimmy huffed. “Why wouldn’t I be? He’s my roommate. I should get to brag about him from time to time.”

“Well, don’t leave your handsome, technologically-intriguing prince waiting for long,” Grian chuckled. He shooed Jimmy towards the door. “Tell me about whatever that weird rich guy was hiding when you find out. I’m curious.”

“Will do,” Jimmy said, throwing one final wave over his shoulder and leaving the apartment.

The door fell shut, and Grian felt the emptiness swallow him. He tried not to think about it, glancing down at Maui. “Where’s your sister? Hm?”

The cat mewled up at him and bumped his head against Grian’s leg. Then, he turned, walking further into the apartment. The vet followed him to his bedroom.

Scar was waiting, as always, under the covers. He was in a fresh outfit, and there was a towel over his pillow to keep his drying hair off of it. To Grian’s surprise, his missing cat could also be found

occupying the mattress. Pearl looked comfortable, curled up at Scar's side, not even stirring as her owner returned. Maui didn't hesitate to join her, hopping up and taking his place right beside the other furball.

Grian stared, unblinking, for several silent seconds.

The two cats that had once been so wary of this man now made themselves completely at home beside him. They purred in unison with the hiss of his oxygen tank, not bothered by his flushed face and furrowed brow. Neither seemed to care that his arms weren't raising to stroke their fur, or that he couldn't offer them any treats. They were content with his presence alone. They didn't care — didn't *know* — about the pain Scar was constantly suffering through.

But Grian knew. Grian could feel it too. Grian couldn't be by his side without being horrifically aware. He could tell whenever his heart palpitations caused him discomfort, whenever burning poison in his blood roused him from fitful sleep, whenever the ache became so intense that his perspiration increased tenfold.

Reality was uneven and disorderly and uncomfortable, but for a moment, if he let himself focus only on the content faces of his cats, he could almost pretend Scar was just asleep. Scar was resting, napping, stuck in a simple, brief repose. He'd be up soon. He'd rise to pet the kitties, to coo over their little meows, to melt when their purring grew louder, and then, he'd turn those big green eyes of his on Grian, and the world would feel alright again.

The heart monitor beeped. Grian left the room.

He woke slowly. The cushions beneath his body had slipped a bit in

the night, resulting in an awkward tenseness right in the middle of his spine. Grian blinked away the thick filter of sleep, rubbing at his eyes unceremoniously. Scar had only one fit of heart palpitations the night prior, meaning Grian went mostly undisturbed. His rest was not terribly restful, though.

Nightmares waited behind his eyes — senseless in nature, nothing besides ridiculous unpleasantness waiting within them. He arose with a heaviness already settled in his gut, bringing about an unfortunate start for his day. Grian tried not to pay it much mind, going about his usual morning routine.

He washed his face with cold water, worked to untangle his hair, brushed his teeth, then went into the kitchen. The cats were fed, and a pan, alongside two eggs, was laid out on the counter. He didn't do anything with them just yet, though, returning to his room first.

"Morning, Scar," he muttered, though he got no response. Grian started his regular checks on vitals, fluid levels, breathing, and so forth. Scar still had a fever, but his temperature was only a few degrees above healthy. The main thing ailing him remained the mystery poison. Lastly, Grian changed his bandages and administered the activated charcoal medicine.

The cut itself was an ugly display. It was red, puffy, constantly reacting to whatever remained of the irritant. Grian had tried flushing the wound, going through with tweezers to pick out anything visibly disrupting the healing process, but it hadn't helped much.

Grian hesitated there, at Scar's side, for a moment. He reached over, brushing a strand of hair from his eyes. His breath caught at the way Scar reacted to the touch, grumbling in his sleep and seeming to shift towards it. That was the most he garnered, though.

Tamping down false hope, the vet returned to the kitchen. He made himself scrambled eggs, ate them, changed into his scrubs, and answered the door when the expected knock came right on time. Grian greeted Lizzie with a smile and she did the same.

"Morning," she said quietly. He let her in, and she barely hesitated long enough to take off her shoes. The both of them were back beside Scar in a matter of moments. Neither were fond of pleasantries so early in the day. "Everything alright with him?"

"As good as it can be," Grian replied. "I almost slept through the night."

"That's progress." She felt Scar's forehead with the back of her hand. "Maybe he's improving."

Grian nodded, but he didn't speak. Lizzie wasn't someone in need of his realistic pessimism. She was already coping badly with the situation, and he didn't want to add to that by reminding her of his consistently poor health.

"I'll be off, then," Grian said. "Call me if anything happens."

"Of course."

Lizzie escorted him to the door and locked it as soon as he stepped out into the hall.

The walk to work was, as everything tended to be recently, unremarkable. One foot in front of the other again and again and again and again and again. The hypnotic rhythm lulled him into a

pathetic daze. Though he had slept better than usual the night prior, fatigue was a familiar factor in every aspect of his life.

Grian arrived at the clinic eventually. Skizz had just clocked out, so there was a pretty immediate gap for him to fill. Someone had brought in a young pet snake with something that was absolutely *not* food lodged in its throat, which needed to be urgently removed. The little sucker was ambitious in its attempt to swallow a whole plastic bottle cap with such a tiny body, that was for sure.

Afterwards, he assisted in the daily treatment of the animals left in their care. There were a couple of vet techs around for that bit, helping to hold dogs that wouldn't sit still or cats that were prone to scratching, but Grian wasn't bothered for the most part. It was only around lunch time, when he finally got a minute to sit down, that he had his first real conversation.

Somewhere in the middle of the clinic's morning rush, Mumbo had arrived and clocked in. Neither vets had a major opportunity to see one another for those hours, but now, there was a break.

Mumbo had only just set his bag upon the desk as Grian collapsed into his chair. There must've been something in the vet's appearance — maybe his hair was a mess, or there were bags under his eyes — because his friend took one look at him and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" Grian looked up at the other vet, whose scrubs were covered in hair and whose face bore a fresh scratch mark from a cat he'd just finished seeing. "I should be asking you the same thing."

"No, Grian," Mumbo sighed. "No deflecting. You've been off for a week now. What's up?"

“It’s nothing,” Grian replied immediately, aiming to sound as laid back as possible, despite how clearly he could feel his whole body aching. It came out short and curt instead, something that made Mumbo raise a brow. “It’s not affecting my work, so it’ll be fine. Nothing you have to concern yourself with.”

“Well, maybe not affecting your *ability* to work,” the other vet grumbled. “But your attitude could certainly be improved. I fear for whatever poor child has to hear that their beloved family pet has gone on to the big farm in the sky from *your* sorry mouth.”

“Hey,” Grian scoffed, hitting him lightly. “I wouldn’t do that badly.”

“You’re not convincing me,” Mumbo replied, gesturing to his face’s resting expression — which, as of late, had started to resemble a scowl more than anything neutral. Even Grian cringed a little whenever he caught his reflection in passing glass. “So, tell me: What is wrong with you?”

Grian opened his mouth, panicking inwardly. He opted to stall further, focusing on the phrasing by echoing a quiet, “What’s… wrong with me?”

Luckily, it was easy to get Mumbo wound up when it came to social situations.

“Yeah, alright, I heard how it sounded the second it left my mouth,” the other vet sighed, flushing slightly. “Not wrong with *you,* just… *wrong.* You’re wrong.”

Another beat passed.

“No, you’re not *wrong,* you’re just–!” Mumbo threw his hands up. “I’m making a fool of myself. Tell me what’s inside your head already!”

Grian smiled, weak but real, at the ridiculousness brought about by his friend. “I told you, man. I’m fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Evidently, Mumbo found no amusement in the situation whatsoever. He leaned down and took Grian by the shoulders, grip tight. “I know you’re lying to me. You’re *tired,* Grian.”

“Really?” Grian did his best to stay calm and relaxed. “Am I?”

“Yes,” the other vet exclaimed. “You’ve blinked a whole two times more than your usual per-minute average, meaning your eyes are dry and strained and you’re keeping secrets!”

Grian’s jaw dropped. “You *count* how much I *blink?”*

“I count how much everyone blinks!” Mumbo said, “It’s how I ignore the fact that people are looking at me!”

Grian hid his face in his hands and sighed. He needed a second to gather his bearings without a strange interrogation distracting him. His best friend had caught on to his abnormal behavior. He wasn’t surprised, as much as he wished he could be.

With the way things were going, it was really only a matter of time before that came to pass. Scar took up all of Grian’s waking thoughts, and crept into his dreams more often than not as well. The vet would never blame the sick man for needing as much care as he did, but the fact that it was beginning to infect his daily life was undeniable.

Grian wasn't sleeping. He wasn't finding the time to eat. Honestly, he could hardly sit still without worrying that something was going wrong with his patient at any given time. It was the most anxiety he'd ever felt over anybody before.

Maybe it was because his condition was so unstable, or maybe it was just because Scar was the one who was suffering, but it plagued Grian. Enough that the people in his life were realizing.

That absolutely wouldn't do at all. He didn't *want* other people worrying for him, not when he was already consumed with worries of his own. He needed to reassure Mumbo, just to get him to calm down and stop overanalyzing — lest that genius brain of his actually come to a conclusion that was less than pleasant for everyone involved.

With his colleague consumed by a flurry of big feelings, and his every action being observed carefully, Grian opted for the truth.

"I'm fine, genuinely," Grian said. Before Mumbo could argue, he added, "But my friend isn't. He's sick, so I've been taking care of him at my place for the last few days."

Mumbo's shoulders dropped and the tension in his face unwound. "Oh. Really?"

"Yeah," Grian confirmed, nodding. "I've not been sleeping well as a result. That's all, mate."

"Well, uh," he muttered. "Now, I feel a bit silly for causing a fuss."

Grian shrugged, not really wanting to dwell on the topic. If this was good enough to get Mumbo off the scent of something slightly more suspicious going on, he was happy to allow that to happen. Surface level truths had proved to work better than lies when it came to talking about Scar to his coworkers in the past. The less he had to force those out, the better.

Unfortunately, Mumbo wasn't quite done. While he was fishing through his bag for something, no longer looking Grian's way, he asked, "So, what's up with him? Your friend, I mean. Why's he sick? What's he got?"

Grian tensed. Of all the things that might be brought up, this was probably the worst. Still, through clenched teeth, he mustered the best half-truth he could. "We don't know, exactly."

"Oh?" Thankfully, Mumbo didn't notice the change in his posture. "Sounds like you've got your hands full, then."

The vet made himself busy, flipping through some of the papers on the desk absentmindedly. "You could say that."

"Must be pretty serious if it's keeping you this occupied," Mumbo noted. "Is there a reason you're not taking him to a hospital instead?"

"Oh, yeah, that's not an option," Grian replied, a little too fast. Mumbo glanced over, eyebrows raised in surprise. "He's… uh…"

Great. Nice going, Grian's mind hissed. *Not suspicious at all.*

This part couldn't be a half-truth. He needed to come up with a

genuine lie for his friend now — a genuine reason why a sick man couldn't go to the hospital, why he was relying on a vet for medical assistance, why this had fallen on Grian's shoulders instead of a human physician. Worst of all, Mumbo was well-versed in their field. A regular person without a doctorate or any sort of medical knowledge would be much more easily convinced that a hospital was unnecessary in this particular instance.

At the very least, Mumbo hadn't actually been told the extent of it, didn't know the details, wasn't able to see how terrible of a state Scar was in. The heart monitors, IV, and oxygen wouldn't have to be explained away. Grian could still technically lie and say it wasn't *that* serious. For all Mumbo knew, Scar had the flu.

But when it came to threading those thoughts together to form the perfect lie, the one that would cause his friend to abandon any doubts, Grian panicked. He could only sit back and listen as he blurted, "It's because he's scared of hospitals!"

And that was dumb. Beyond dumb. The dumbest thing on the face of the planet.

Out of every possible excuse he could've ever used, being scared of hospitals was perhaps the least believable. There wasn't a world that Grian could ever picture in which Scar, the man behind the infamous villain, Ringmaster, would ever fear a hospital. Even Mumbo, who did not know Scar, and therefore, could not see the true stupidity of what Grian had just said, looked surprised.

"Scared of… hospitals," Mumbo echoed, giving a slow nod. "Uh, right. I've heard of people like that before. I guess it makes sense, all the needles and fluorescents and *people* walking around."

He gave a shiver.

“Yeah, I agree with your friend, actually,” Mumbo concluded. “That many employees trying to talk to me over the course of a single stay would probably make my heart stop. Remind me to call you next time I get sick too.”

Whatever response he was expecting Mumbo to give, it had not been that. Grian stared, awe and disbelief written plainly on his expression. He couldn’t even be bothered to attempt to hide it.

Mumbo *bought* it? *Really?*

Mumbo, the man with years of experience and the keenest eye on their side of the medical field — who just admitted that he was able to read people based on how often they *blinked* — had bought it?

“Um, okay, sure,” he muttered, because there was little else he *could* say without revealing his hand. “Just give me a call.”

Something akin to wonder broke through his racing heart, expanding rapidly outward. Grian couldn’t believe it. Not one bit. He was lucky, that was for damn sure. Skizz would have hesitated, pressed further until Grian couldn’t lie anymore. Mumbo, however, was only really perceptive when he knew he needed to be, or it was beyond obvious. Past discovering why Grian was acting weird, he clearly had turned off the part of his brain that was looking for faults in the other’s argument.

Grian could breathe for the time being. Thanks to sweet, innocent, gullible Mumbo. He felt guilty for the lie, felt guilty for rejoicing in how easily it’d been accepted, since that meant he was exploiting his friend’s trust in him as a means to an end, but he didn’t feel guilty for very long. Mostly, he was just relieved.

“Obviously, you should take him to the hospital regardless if it gets to a point, but you definitely know that already. Give me a shout if there’s ever anything I can do for you,” Mumbo went on. “I’m always willing to pick up shifts and whatnot. Skizz would probably say the same thing — we were both worried about you.”

Suddenly, Grian was immensely thankful he hadn’t encountered Skizz. If bumping into him meant he would be delivering this speech and not Mumbo, he’d have been screwed. It wasn’t surprising to hear that they were both worried, but this was the better of the two by which to be lectured.

“Right,” Grian croaked, relaxing a little. He let himself smile. “Thanks, Mumbo. I might take you up on that sometime.”

Mumbo stepped away from his bag, and closer to him. His expression shifted into something stern – a seriousness that was almost worthy of concern. A big hand came down onto Grian’s shoulder. “Remember, dude. You can’t take care of anyone if you don’t take care of yourself too. Keep that in mind.”

Grian took a deep breath and nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good,” Mumbo said, brows unfurrowing. He swayed towards the threshold. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I just saw someone walk in the front door, so I’m going to hide in the back until I absolutely *have* to do my job. Bye!”

“Bye!”

He watched Mumbo’s retreating form as he exited down the hall, then

turned back to doing his job.

And over the course of the next few days, Grian really did try to take his advice. He cared about how his friends perceived him, cared enough to not want them to be concerned for his well being, cared about being better for their sakes. It was just hard to truly internalize it when he was far more consumed with Scar.

Nights got easier, but that didn't mean Grian slept through them. If anything, he had become more anxious. Scar didn't wake as often, which meant the heart palpitations and vomiting had begun to slow, and his condition was theoretically improving. However, it also provided the vet with room to entertain more fears.

He had nightmares now. Nightmares of Scar flatlining in his sleep – passing silently and leaving Grian alone with a corpse. The stillness that replaced the previous spells of panic was haunting, oppressive. He couldn't shake the looming idea that this was the calm before the storm, and that it was going to get worse.

Oftentimes, the vet would stare up at his darkened ceiling for hours on end, just listening to the other man breathing. Just listening to ensure he still *could* breathe.

On occasion, that wouldn't be enough. During those shameful nights, in which his paranoia got the better of him, he'd spend the entirety at Scar's bedside. He'd watch the rise and fall of the other's chest, a hand on his wrist, counting out each beat of his heart. Dusk would bleed into dawn like that, and he still wouldn't move.

Early one morning, he found himself in another of those dazes, fingers tracing patterns over Scar's pulse and head pounding from the weight of the sunlight through his curtains. There were things to be done with the arrival of the day, but he couldn't make his body move, or

his mind detach from its fixation. All of his attention was focused on the man before him. Grian was tuned into every intake of breath, every beat of his heart, every twitch from Scar's brow.

"I don't have to go to work today," Grian whispered, as if volume would be the thing to finally wake his friend. "I'll be here if you need me."

Scar remained deaf to his ramblings. His lip did shift, though, turning down ever so slightly at the corners. His pulse picked up a minuscule amount, not indicating anything significant, but Grian noticed. Scar was having a bad dream, most likely, or his pain was flaring the tiniest bit.

The vet sat back, ignoring how his shoulders ached and his bones protested after so long of remaining in the same hunched position. He took the damp towel from its bowl on the side table, and began to wipe at Scar's forehead. The cool sensation loosened some of the tension there, opening his patient up to deeper breaths, a steadier heart rate. Whatever had been ailing him faded, and he returned to looking as though he were simply sleeping again.

"Oh, Scar," Grian said, low and somber.

He paused his tender movements to stare. Morning light suited Scar well, bathing him in a golden glow, blooming like marigolds around his form. In tandem with the effects of sleep, it worked to smooth out the roughness of the evening, highlighting the curve of his jaw and the dip in his lips. The splotchy redness of his face evened out under the healthy shine, almost enough to ignore the reality of their situation.

Carefully, Grian set aside his towel, and let the skin of his palm ghost over Scar's cheek. He was interrupted only by the stagnant barrier of his oxygen mask, cold and distant and terribly necessary. Visions of

flowers wilted with each puff of air it forced into the lungs of the sleeping man. It left little room to appreciate unobstructed, natural beauty through its plastic encasement.

There was no reaction to his touch. No stirring or flustered stammering or bright smiling or pointed teasing. The room was silent before, and it was silent then.

“Wake up soon,” Grian whispered.

His chest squeezed, voice cracked. He needed to be heard, seen, felt. He needed to laugh again, to feel joy again, to sleep again knowing Scar would open his eyes come morning light. He needed to return home to a bloodied figure waiting to be stitched up, because at least that was a wound that could be healed, a tear that could mend. This cliffedge between life and loss, between having Scar, and never getting a chance to know him, was worse than any intermittent pain.

“Please, Scar. For me. Wake up soon.”

But the morning birds sang, the oxygen mask breathed, the heart monitor beeped, and over it all, Scar could not hear him.

Grian knew that, should reprieve ever decide him worthy of its mercy, it would not be finding him today.

The vet leaned forward and let his lips press into the sleeping man’s forehead. It stung like a farewell, though Grian never left his side. Not before. Not then. Not for a long while yet.

Grian didn’t sleep. Scar didn’t wake. The world kept turning.

“Thanks for letting me bring Jellie,” Lizzie said as she stepped through the threshold into Grian’s bedroom. The door was closed behind them, putting a barrier between a curious Pearl and Maui — both of whom would have a fit if they knew their favorite spot was being invaded by an unknown cat. “She’s just been so down in the dumps. I don’t think he’s ever left her for a full week and a half before.”

“It’s alright,” Grian hummed, watching Lizzie set the pet carrier on the ground beside the bed. “Last thing I want is for Jellie to be in bad spirits. Scar would kill us both if we let his queen be sad for too long.”

“He really would,” Lizzie agreed. “Well, he’d kill *me.* You’d probably get out of it just by batting your eyes or something gross like that.”

Another time, under different circumstances, Grian would’ve denied it, or tuned her out. Before his tests, before his realizations, before his world had nearly died in his arms, he wouldn’t have let himself find meaning in her words. He thought it ridiculous that someone as bold and bright and known as Scar would ever truly turn his eyes upon someone so many leagues beneath him.

He knew better now — or he hoped he did. Only the future could really answer his overarching questions. Only the future could really confirm what he’d devoted his entire being to figuring out. Only the future, and a clarity in Scar’s lovely eyes, could reach him completely. In the meantime, though, he’d formed his own opinion, his own version of what he wanted to be real, and he could comprehend everything that Lizzie was suggesting. There was no longer a point in lying, in denying, in keeping it to himself. So, he just sighed out a small, “Maybe.”

The woman shot him a look, dull and yet intrigued, but she didn't ask the inquiry on the tip of her tongue. He answered her anyway with a look of his own, more honest than he'd let himself be in a while. An understanding passed in the space between them.

"He'll get better," was her response. "He will."

"I know," Grian said, because there was nothing else to say. "Let Jellie out. She's getting restless."

Jellie was perfectly quiet, but Lizzie opened the carrier anyway. A round head poked out first, nose twitching as she sniffed the air. Maui and Pearl's scents were undoubtedly lingering, causing her to hesitate for a minute.

Lizzie knelt and held out a hand, encouraging the sweet girl to step into the open. Jellie still took a beat or two, just observing her surroundings, as if an enemy cat could jump at her at any moment. Then, finally, she emerged.

They watched her wander gingerly around the perimeter, neither pushing her any which way. Luckily, it didn't take long for her to pick up on Scar's scent. The exact moment she realized he was nearby, her tail began to whip faster, and her steps picked up speed. She had to hop onto the chair first before she could reach the top of the bed, but she certainly managed.

She landed on the mattress beside Scar with a small rumbling noise and a purr already building in her tiny body. Lizzie smiled at the way she galloped over to him, pausing only to sniff a trail from his hand to his face. The oxygen mask put her off a bit, but she was bumping her head into it not long after discovering its existence.

“Those two have such a cute bond,” Lizzie whispered, as if speaking too loudly would break the moment. “If I got sick, Meri probably wouldn’t even notice. She’d be all too happy to just stay with Joel for a while. That traitor has always liked him more.”

Grian raised a brow. “His name is Joel?”

Lizzie glared at him. “I never told you that.”

“Consider it forgotten.” Grian nudged her. “You have a terrible habit.”

“Tell me about it,” she huffed. “I’m as bad as the Tuff Guys.”

Grian shook his head. “Don’t be so harsh on yourself. Your information isn’t plastered all over the internet. It could absolutely be worse.”

Both of them were distracted from their conversation by a meow from the bed. Jellie was staring down at Scar’s sleeping face, tilting her head from side to side. She meowed again, and when she received no reply, rubbed her whole body up against him.

Jellie gave up on his face, padding down to where his hand rested at his side. She crouched and dug her nose underneath it, as if trying to force the appendage up. Scar still did not move. The cat didn’t understand why.

She mewled again, louder this time. Nothing. She began to knead at his wrist, chirping every few seconds. Scar did not stir. Jellie stopped, glancing back at the only other two in the room.

Lizzie sucked in a breath. Grian felt part of himself shatter.

Jellie's tail ceased its swishing. She slumped on the spot, settling the whole of her body atop Scar's unresponsive hand. Her eyes closed, and the mood of the room sank irreparably.

Grian took it upon himself to step forward, scratching Jellie's head gently. "It'll be okay. He'll wake up."

He ignored how similar these words were to the ones he told himself when the quiet became too stifling. Jellie took a similarly little amount of comfort from them, not even reacting to him.

Grian met Lizzie's gaze solemnly. "Come on. I'll make you a cup of tea."

He didn't wait for her reply, opening the door and stepping into the hall. Pearl and Maui ran off, having obviously been caught sniffing at the door. Unfortunately, Grian was too downtrodden to find their slipping and scattering amusing. He proceeded into the kitchen, hearing Lizzie's soft footsteps echoing his own.

Two cups of tea were prepared in silence, and then consumed in the same fashion. They stayed at the kitchen table — all the chairs in the living room having been stripped of their pillows a week prior.

When she finished, Lizzie traced circles along the rim of her cup. Grian simply stared down at his hands.

Both of them startled as a knock came at the door, pace frantic. They exchanged a confused glance, neither of them having expected any company, and Lizzie stood. Grian watched her reach into her tall boot and remove her signature weapon, currently in its smallest form with the blade retracted. A single press of a button changed it into a dagger, metallic edges gleaming in the afternoon light. She crept towards the door, steps quiet.

As she reached it, Lizzie hid her knife behind her back and out of view. Carefully, she opened the door.

Without a single second of hesitation, a man was pushing inside, roughly shoving to get in as fast as possible. Surprised, Lizzie reacted by grabbing his wrist and twisting it behind him, eliciting a yelp of pain from the newcomer. Her dagger was at his neck in a split second.

“Liz, quit it!”

At the sound of Jimmy’s strained voice, the room’s tension vanished. Lizzie pulled away her knife, frowning up at the frumpled blond man. “Jimmy? What are you doing? Why are you–?”

“I knew you’d both be here,” Jimmy interrupted. Grian noticed now the quickness of his breathing, like he’d sprinted to the apartment. His eyes were wide too, pupils dilated and gaze never staying in one place. He looked scared. “I was with Tango. We spent all night going through that drive thingy, because it had a *lot* of stuff on it, like a ton of information about stocks and investments and—“

“Jimmy, skip to the important bit,” Lizzie hissed. “What’s got you so worked up?”

“It’s *weapons,* Liz,” Jimmy hissed, grabbing her by the shoulders. “He’s investing in the invention of *weapons.”*

The room fell silent.

“What?” Grian stood. “What do you mean?”

“I saw it with my own two eyes,” the other insisted. “I saw patents and schematics and *weapons* just strewn throughout it. And they’re not small things either. Not the kind that’s meant to stun you. There’s bows, swords, spears — even guns. Those were designed to *kill,* Liz.”

Lizzie didn’t respond. She stared at Jimmy, face pale and disbelieving. “What? They’re—? What?”

“I don’t know all the details,” Jimmy went on. “But there’s this document on there, right at the very top, like it’s the most important. It’s a proposal for the Agency — allegedly to help them *‘get rid of their little villain infestation’* which basically confirms everything I just said. Do you know what that means?”

“The Agency’s trying to kill you,” Grian concluded. The tips of his fingers had gone numb. He stumbled back and fell into his chair.

“Oh my God,” Lizzie whispered, looking like she was seconds away from being sick. “We accidentally stole the Agency’s plans to kill us.”

“They’ve always hated us, always tried to put us behind bars,” Jimmy said, running his hands through his hair. “But they’ve *never* tried to kill us before. Not on purpose. It’s against their policy!”

“Policy be damned,” Lizzie muttered. “Do you remember that night a few months ago? We crashed an event their sponsors were hosting, made a mess of them and that security system they prided themselves on.”

Her eyes turned to Grian, who was still barely keeping hold of his sanity.

“Actually, that was the night we met him,” she said, pointing. “When they targeted us harder than they normally did, Scar ended up getting shot, and Grian saved him.”

Grian frowned. “What? You mean—?”

For some reason, he’d never thought to ask what had led to Scar getting an arrow embedded in his side all that time ago.

The Agency, and especially Slayer, boasted about their code of arresting criminals instead of killing them. With their projectiles, they’d aim for limbs and whatnot. Never vital points like where Scar had been shot. Never points that could’ve ended in death. And with Slayer’s infallible aim being responsible for that arrow, it had absolutely landed where intended.

Back then, Grian had written it off. He’d assumed the Agency was planning on just capturing Scar and bringing him to their headquarters for treatment and due process. It was a dangerous injury, but not one their expert doctors wouldn’t have taken care of easily, right?

But now, he was learning a new side to the heroes. It was one he’d

always feared existed, even if he never really expected it to be true. It was one that valued the wellbeing of their sponsors, to the point of betraying morals.

And it could very well mean that Slayer had shot to kill that night, under orders from the very same Agency that bragged about peace.

“No,” Lizzie muttered. “No, he wouldn’t have—“

“Lizzie,” Jimmy said. Grian took a deep breath, trying to get a hold of his rationale. He saw the woman growing visibly more distressed, saw her shaking her head and beginning to back away. “Lizzie, it’s possible *he* wasn’t involved.”

He didn’t, at first, understand her reaction. Grian heard her muttering, saw her fear, watched the world cave in around her as she futilely tried to deny it. He stared into her eyes, and saw a flash of something that could only be described as the start of a heartbreak.

And it was then that Grian remembered the full extent of what was at stake for Lizzie in this instance: Her boyfriend — the hero. The one she’d been dating since long before that fateful night. The one that was partnered with Slayer. The one that would’ve been under the same orders as said partner all those months ago. The one that would’ve known if Slayer was aiming to kill, and the one that hadn’t told Lizzie any of this.

“He wouldn’t do that,” Lizzie hissed, but it came out strangled, like she was only willing it to be true. “He wouldn’t *do* that, Jimmy.”

“I know,” Jimmy replied softly, taking her by the shoulders and wincing as she pushed him away. “Listen, Liz, I don’t have the whole story. There’s probably a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“You said it was a proposal, right?” Lizzie sounded almost manic. “It’s possible this wasn’t approved yet. Why would the Agency have allowed such important stuff to exist in some random bank vault if it was finalized?”

Grian straightened. Lizzie brought up a good point.

The Agency had facilities far more secure, even if the bank had been installing some super expensive measures to keep this stuff safe. A villain getting their hands on the literal tools meant to eliminate them was a worst-case scenario for the designer of these patents. If the heroes were genuinely in charge of protecting such information, it wouldn’t have been something physically possible for anyone to accidentally stumble across.

Which meant that it was possible the Agency still didn’t endorse killing. It was possible Slayer hadn’t been aiming to kill that night. It was possible Furioso — *Joel* — hadn’t betrayed his girlfriend.

Lizzie sank to the floor, relief shaking her shoulders and wrenching a sob from her throat. Grian couldn’t begin to imagine what she was experiencing. Her fear, grief, love, and tentative trust had all been toyed with at once. Nothing was certain one way or another yet, but she clung to this fragile hope with everything she had. None of them could blame her for it. Her relationship depended on it.

“I’ll look into this more,” Jimmy promised. He started towards the door, a new urgency in his steps. “I’ll see what I can find. I’m sure it’s fine. I’m sure there’s just… a clue we missed.”

Lizzie did not look up at him. She hugged herself, silent and unmoving. Jimmy shot one last glance at the vet, nodded, and exited.

Monochrome nothingness settled over them. An unpleasant amalgamation of the worst possible emotions floated in the air, unsure of whether to make their homes within the present company or temporarily disperse. With so much left unsaid, so much left unknown, there was no definite feeling remaining.

Grian stayed with Lizzie until she eventually calmed down. It took several minutes and another cup of tea, but she did return to regular breathing and regained some color in her cheeks.

“He wouldn’t do that, Grian,” Lizzie insisted, but it was half-hearted and weak. “He really is a good person, even towards a criminal like me. He wouldn’t kill when he could rather seek justice. The blood on his hands isn’t permanent like it is on mine.”

Grian nodded, a sigh pushing from his mouth. “I believe you.”

He wasn’t lying, but he wasn’t giving her the whole truth either. It was impossible for Grian to ignore how damning the evidence was — if not accounting for Slayer’s arrow that first night, then just by looking at Scar’s present condition. He’d been shot again, by a different hero this time, and again, his life was in danger.

If what they said was true, the Bamboozlers had established themselves as a threat to some of the Agency’s biggest supporters. Making themselves a direct enemy like that was bound to get them a new, more dangerous type of attention.

Still, he saw her point, and saw the other side of it. No matter how bothersome they were, the heroes abandoning their moral code to try and kill the Bamboozlers seemed like an extreme escalation. And, on top of that, it couldn’t be ignored how easily these bits of information

had been stolen. Nothing added up. There were parts of the story still yet to be discovered. Jimmy and Tango would look into it, but they needed to stay calm until more was known.

"What do I do?" Lizzie looked up at him from over her half-empty drink. Her eyes were desperate, confused. "What do I say to Joel? How am I supposed to talk to him after this?"

"I don't… know," Grian answered honestly. For her sake, he genuinely considered it.

On one hand, mentioning this scheme to a hero was probably the fastest way to come to a distinct conclusion. On the other hand, if the scheme turned out to be something genuinely worth worrying about, then Lizzie might be bringing up the subject of her murder directly to a possible murderer. The potential for it to go really wrong could not be ignored.

"Be safe about it, or maybe… don't do it at all," was his advice, the best he could offer. She nodded numbly, like she'd already known he would say that.

"Could you, um," Lizzie started. "Can Jellie stay with you tonight by chance? I just… I would hate to take her home so soon, but I really need to… I have to go."

"Yeah." Grian nodded, not even thinking about it. This was a last minute request, but he could see the toll these events had taken on her. "Yeah, whatever you need."

"Great, cool," Lizzie replied, clearing her throat. She set down her cup, and stood. "I'll be on my way then."

Without another word, Lizzie grabbed her things and left.

Nothing else to do, Grian gathered his own strength and pushed aside the difficulties of the day to contemplate later. For the time being, he had to figure out how he was going to handle having an extra furry body in the apartment that night.

He sighed once to himself, long, slow, and tired, and then got to work.

Lizzie was not able to pick up Jellie for several days after their conversation. She never gave an explicit reason, but she did always ask the vet if it was alright for her to leave the cat for another night before she did it, and waited for his permission each time. Grian suspected she was requesting this for a multitude of reasons.

Jellie did, after all, represent a piece of Scar. Scar, whose near-death experiences was proof of faults in her relationship with her boyfriend, and who still hadn't improved enough to be notable. It would make sense that the idea of seeing her might fill Lizzie with some level of dread. And then, there were the texts.

Jimmy had made a group chat with the three of them in it, and he'd send little updates every few hours when he could about his and Tango's progress. There wasn't much, but they were combing carefully through any documents they could find to try and figure out details. Results remained inconclusive – a fact that was sure to revitalize Lizzie's discontent yet again whenever she was reminded.

The pink-haired woman wasn't even properly able to come in for her shifts to watch over Scar. Most of the time, when she could, she had

Jimmy fill in for her. It was fine, and she was allowed to do whatever she liked, but the vet did still worry. He made a point to send her a message at least once a day to check in.

Honestly, Grian didn't mind keeping Jellie. It wasn't like it was his first time catsitting in his life, and the little queen tended to be fairly low maintenance, all things considered. Pearl and Maui were far needier and far louder about their every desire than she ever was.

She remained inside Grian's bedroom for the extent of her stay. Socializing her to his two demons would take longer, and he knew better than to try and rush those aspects of the animal world. They were allowed to sniff each other under the door, but they never met face to face for the sake of preventing fights.

The vet had fished out an old litter box from storage and set it up in the corner for her, alongside water and food. She slept on the bed with Scar, always in the same spot beside his hand, as if trying to be convenient for him to pet. When her owner would startle into consciousness for his usual brief fits, she'd typically jump off and hide under the bed, but she would return the second Scar was quiet again. No amount of sudden behavior from Scar could keep her away from the sickly man, and Grian empathized there.

It was like that, with Jimmy working hard to find information, Lizzie fretting over the state of her relationship, and Grian caring for more creatures in his apartment than ever before that they reached the two week mark. Two weeks since Scar was shot. Two weeks since he'd spoken his last coherent sentence. Two weeks since there'd been any clarity in his eyes.

No one kept track out loud, but the reality of time passing weighed heavily on all of them. He could see it in the way Jimmy's gaze would scan the man in the bed as he walked in for his visits, followed shortly by a small glance down at his phone — seeing how long it'd been since the day, the hour, the minute since he'd lost his friend. It was a

dangerous habit, one prone to reminding its victim of the worst aspects of the situation, rather than the small improvements.

Grian couldn't let himself do that. His spirits were already so low, so strained, so close to cracking forever, and he needed those intact if he wanted to be of use to his patient. He didn't bother looking at his phone when he wasn't due for work, or answering a call, which was slightly more frequent recently. Mumbo had taken to calling at least once per day, solely to chat. He was sweet in that way, taking time out of his busy schedule to check on Grian.

Otherwise, when he didn't have Mumbo's voice to distract him, Grian kept himself busy with cleaning. The apartment had been vacuumed, dusted, scrubbed high and low whenever he got the chance. With Scar recovering from his fever, yet still prone to other forms of illness, the vet had decided to get the place as close to sterile as any home physically could. It took several days, considering his horrible aches and practically never-ending fatigue tended to slow him down, but it did get done.

At the end of it all, Grian was left feeling gross. The last thing that could do with a thorough clean was himself. He hadn't actually been able to have an unhurried, satisfying shower in two weeks. Every time he was in the water, he became anxious, worried that Scar was going to need him, and he wasn't going to be there.

But Scar was calmer now, if not a little less pained altogether. The moments in which he needed someone around – in which he'd wake, disoriented, and sob or wretch until he was coaxed into relaxing – didn't happen quite as often.

Finally, after so long of putting it off, Grian allowed himself to take a second to unwind. Just for the duration of a single, comfortable shower.

He let hot water run over his shoulders, turning his skin pink. He massaged shampoo into his scalp in repetitive circular motions, getting out tension he hadn't realized was still lingering. He smoothed his conditioner through next, moisturizing and basking in the sweet floral fragrance it emitted.

The humidity was beyond welcome as well. Dry air was replaced with a comfortable weight in his chest and lungs. It worked to clear his mind, taking away a large amount of stress in the process. He would've stayed there, simply breathing in and out, for hours if he were able.

But things never went according to plan for him anymore.

Grian had just finished his scrubbing and was enjoying the warmth for a moment longer when a scream came from his bedroom.

In an instant, he was stumbling out of his shower, shrugging on his robe, and sprinting across the apartment. Water dripped off his legs, leaving wet footprints in his wake, but he didn't care. His mind chanted *Scar, Scar, Scar,* and nothing else mattered.

"Scar! I'm here," he called, rushing towards the bedside. His footing was lost briefly, and he had to catch himself on the edge of his chair, but he recovered fast.

At the commotion, Jellie had scrambled to hide under the bed, leaving her owner alone on the mattress. Scar was trying to sit up, heaving for breath and choking out sobs. He'd ripped off his oxygen mask in the time it took for the vet to arrive, meaning his chest rose and fell erratically while he gasped.

Grian steadied him with a firm hand on his back, using the other to

keep Scar from flailing. The last thing they needed was a problem with his IV too. “It’s alright. Just breathe.”

The other’s heart rate was skyrocketing, the monitor beeping loudly and filling the room with noise. Judging by the way his hand had come up to grip at the fabric over his chest, Scar was having palpitations again. Grian had dealt with this several times now, and barely had to think about all that he’d read to begin his usual method of treating it.

Gently, while remaining firm enough to ensure he was not knocked away, he took Scar’s face, forcing him to look over. “Hey, buddy,” the vet said, speaking softly. “I know it feels bad, but you’ll be okay. We’re going to do a breathing exercise. Sound good?”

Scar’s eyes were hazy, unfocused, but he closed them, and to Grian’s surprise, he nodded. It was like a shot of pure adrenaline. After ages of being unreachable, Scar had *heard him.* Better than that, Scar had *responded.*

In the past, while dealing with these spells, Grian would speak to him, instruct him, but it would mostly be time that helped them through those instances. The vet could know everything there was to know about heart palpitations, could recite all of that back in a flash, but nothing would make Scar listen. Not until right at this very second, when Scar had *nodded.*

It was so thrilling, so shocking, so terrifying that he almost forgot what he had to do. He made himself shake out his shoulders and exhale to see the full picture again. His patient needed assistance, and he was going to provide it.

Grian centered his mind in the present, promised himself he could feel these things at a more appropriate time, and forced a calm to settle

over him. Scar would only get worse if he sensed anxious energy on Grian. Both of them needed to focus.

“Alright, deep inhale through the nose,” Grian guided. Scar obeyed, trembling as he did so. It was a miraculous, dizzying thing to witness after two weeks of nothing. “Long exhale out through the mouth. Good, again.”

They fell silent, breathing together in a repetitive pattern. In through the nose, out through the mouth, over and over. An air of serenity filtered in to fill the void between them.

Gradually, the heart monitor slowed its hastened rhythm, returning to a more regular BPM. Scar’s eyelids grew heavy as he relaxed, and soon, they were safe to wind down the exercise. It went by significantly faster with a patient that had a bit of mental clarity.

Grian felt droplets of water slide down his face, as well as the back of his neck. He was soaked, stuck in what was probably the most ridiculous state ever thanks to the terrible timing of this issue. Still, he couldn’t find it in himself to mind. Once everything was completely at ease again, and he was certain Scar wasn’t going to panic further, he could dry off.

For now, his mind raced, his heart soared, and his chest squeezed. Scar was awake, at least to some degree. Not only were his eyes open, but he was comprehending partial aspects of the world around him. A single nod and a perfectly-executed breathing exercise was more than they’d gotten from him in far too long.

Grian hummed, softly asking, “Feeling any better?”

Scar gave a weak grunt, though it was unclear whether it was in

confirmation or a disagreement. His throat sounded raspy, roughened as a result of the scream and lack of use. Grian retrieved an unopened bottle of water from the bedside table, and gingerly helped his friend take a sip.

Once that was done, he assisted Scar in reclining again. Despite the fact that he didn't seem to be keen on immediately falling asleep, like he usually did after uncomfortable fits, staying upright was difficult for him, so this was the best option.

This time, however, Grian put down a strategically-placed pillow, urging him onto his side so that he was facing the nearby chair. While positioned like that, they could see each other without either of them straining too terribly. The vet leaned back into his own seat, brushing a few stray strands of hair out of his face.

"You're…" Scar started, surprising Grian with the sound of his voice. It was hoarse, and the words were interrupted by coughs. It was unwise to use it this soon into waking, and yet the vet could not bring himself to shush him. In fact, Grian found himself leaning closer to hear better. "You're covered in… water, G."

Grian cracked a smile, a small, astounded laugh punching out of him. He reached over, grabbing the usual wet cloth and dabbing at Scar's face. "I am," he said. "And now, we're matching."

Scar scrunched up his nose. He didn't have the energy to push the vet away or protest, though. It was a beautiful display in and of itself. Anything that let the man's personality shine during the darkness of their time together was worth cherishing.

In all honesty, it wasn't likely that Scar would remember this interaction in the future. It was brief, fleeting, and there was still a distance in his eyes that told Grian that he hadn't totally recovered.

Words and actions and responses were progress, but they were only the start. It was best not to expect too much, or push him too far while he was weak.

The vet went ahead and changed the other's bandages, cleaning the arrow wound as always. It was better to get this out of the way while the guy was awake and capable of shifting when asked – a facet of treating someone that Grian had sorely missed after dealing with a limp husk for ages.

The skin of the wound wasn't as irritated these days, but the healing process was worryingly slow, like the remainder of the poison was eating away at it whenever it got better. All Grian could do was treat what he understood, and hope for the best. Even if this proved to be an omen, and Scar's recovery took equally as long, he would wait, and he wouldn't complain.

He would do anything to see this man better. Anything.

It didn't take long for Scar to fade into slumber again. Grian allowed it, certain he had to be tired after exerting himself more than he'd done in several days. His sleeping face untensed, his shoulders slumped into the pillows, and he was gone. Grian put on his oxygen mask again, glad to see that Scar hadn't seriously damaged it in his panic, and waited for a few minutes, just in case he woke back up.

Once he was certain there would be peace in the apartment, Grian returned to the bathroom. He dried his hair, changed into pajamas, and retired to his room. By that point, Jellie had emerged from her hiding spot and curled up beside Scar, as she usually did. Her purrs were a nice contrast to the white noise of the space's several various machines, helping him unwind.

As usual, he kept the door to his closet cracked, and the light on

inside. It cast the right amount of brightness to not rouse those trying to sleep, while also providing enough visibility that Scar could open his eyes and not feel completely lost. Grian anticipated his patient's fears as best he could, even if he was only able to combat them in a couple of measly ways.

The second he'd settled upon his makeshift bed, fatigue was quick to pull him under into unconsciousness. He dreamed of bright green eyes, and a world where everything was that much closer to being alright. For the first time in a while, it seemed almost within reach.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY TUESDAY!! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR 120K HITS!!!

Geez, I leave for a week and a half and you guys blow this thing out of the water - I can't say I'm surprised. Anyway, I'm sorry for making you wait for this chapter, but I had a great time on my vacation, and now I'm back to posting again!!

Now, some of you may have noticed when opening this chapter, but I have updated the total chapter amount. Midnight Strangers is going to end up being 13 chapters instead of 12, just so I can make sure everything is paced well and that you get the best reading experience I can provide. If that needs to change again, it will, but I'm feeling much better about the current chapter count. We'll see.

As always, none of this would be possible without my lovely beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

My discord server is available to join here! You'll be able to get notifications whenever I post, and chat with me more directly! For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! See you next Tuesday!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grian leaned back in his chair, tracing droplets of rain as they raced one another down the window panes. A dreary sky spilled its guts upon the world below, thick and heavy and drumming in consistent intervals. The vet's mind latched onto the sound, letting it drown out unwelcome thoughts, rushing like a wave over his skull, and lulling him into an almost-trance.

It had been a full day since Scar had spoken. As soon as the sun had risen on the horizon, Grian had given the news to the other Bamboozlers. Lizzie and Jimmy had, as expected, dropped everything to scramble to his apartment. Scar did not stir for the duration of their visit, but he didn't need to – just the promise that he was capable of doing it eventually was enough.

Through this sudden appearance, he'd been able to get a better look at Lizzie. She was visibly exhausted, her eyes infested with a puffy redness, and her face pale. She brightened at the idea of Scar waking, but that lively shine had not returned to her yet.

Jimmy was similarly bittersweet to see. He'd clearly been working hard, spending all his free time either by Scar's bedside or with Tango. Like Grian, he was also sporting some severe dark circles.

That day, Jimmy brought with him a closed folder, which was revealed to the other two once they'd visited with the temporarily-sleeping man for a little while.

Inside, there were dozens of printed out pictures. They were spread out along the kitchen table, Jimmy sitting back to watch as they sifted

through them. Grian realized quickly that they were blueprints. Specifically, blueprints for *weapons.* He picked up the first one to catch his eye. It was the details for some sort of sword.

The blade was long, eerily similar to the kind Furioso used, with indents along one edge. Grian could tell from that choice of pattern alone that the damage dealt from coming into contact with such divots would be ten times worse. He could practically see the tearing wounds, hear the screams of pain. It made bile rise in the back of his throat.

Swords on their own could be lethal or inflict permanent marks upon those on the receiving end, but when used by individuals with proper training and proper intentions, that was less of a worry. People trained by the Agency for the supposed purpose of arresting and not killing were highly skilled in the correct utilization of their weapon.

A good example of this, controversial as he was amongst the Bamboozlers at that moment, was Furioso – *Joel.*

He was known for his blades, and his nimble usage of them. Whenever he struck out, it was to cause injuries that might prevent the villain from escaping, or render their powers useless. If he managed to hit anything aside from those places, it was at the fault of his opponent. It was almost habitual for him to lunge towards legs, arms, and so forth to get a one-up in the fight.

But this sword, which had been waiting in that drive to be crafted into something real, was not going to facilitate the continuation of those habits very well. Grian knew that wielding it while employing the same tactics as Joel did with his usual weapons would cause a much different outcome in the fight.

Never mind an opponent not running away during that interaction –

one well-aimed slash from this blade would ensure they never so much as walked again.

Nauseated, Grian set the blueprint down to grab for the next. What he witnessed there was not better.

It was a bow — full-sized, something closer to the weapon Necromancer carried, not just a crossbow, like Slayer toted around. However, this differed from other bows with the amount of notches it contained for arrows. From the design and the shape, Grian figured about three could be fired off at a time. It wasn't quite as bad as the sword at first glance, but with a single second of deeper thought, the bow transformed into something reckless.

Wielders of long-ranged weapons like Necromancer and Slayer had very precise aim when they shot off one arrow at a time. They could, in a similar fashion to Furioso with his swords, target limbs, clothing, or cause general disruptions by firing their projectiles in strategic patterns.

The game changed a little when every release of the bow sent three arrows flying in a single movement. Those couldn't be individually aimed, spaced to avoid vital points. The wielder would be releasing a barrage of attacks in the general direction of another human being, and if the arrows pierced bone or veered off course to hit an onlooking civilian, that would just be unexpected collateral damage.

Grian pushed the blueprints away, stomach churning even further. All he could do was stare down at the stack on the table.

He understood, then, why Jimmy seemed so detached recently. Two weapons alone had made his mouth dry and his breathing shaky, and he wasn't even their intended target. To look through this many others of the same variety, as Jimmy and Tango had been doing, and

knowing they were made to kill everyone they held dear must have been exceedingly disorienting.

Lizzie was matching the vet's expression, horror and grief tangled together upon her face in a way that almost seemed normal for the three of them now. The blueprint she was holding, from what little corner Grian could see, seemed to be one of the designs for a gun that Jimmy had mentioned previously. He didn't let his eyes linger on it for long.

"This is half," Jimmy said hollowly. "Half of everything we found."

Grian blanched, and Lizzie swayed forward, catching herself on the table like she couldn't trust her legs to hold her upright.

More?

There had to be sixty papers strewn out in front of them already, but now Jimmy was saying there were *more?*

"God," the vet whispered. "Are they trying to arm a whole militia?"

"I don't think they're planning on using all of them," Jimmy said. He reached forward and brushed aside a handful of designs to find a document, printed in neat, black ink and only about a page long. "In this saved email, we're pretty sure the concept is that each hero picks a weapon, so the sheer amount is just for a variety of options. The individuals whose designs are chosen over all of the others gets a cash payout, with a solid forty percent going to our favorite businessman, and a bonus to anyone who invests in the lucky weapon."

“They’re making it a game for their investors,” Lizzie spat. Her hand curled tighter around the paper she was holding, causing it to crease and crinkle. “They want to make the heroes choose how they’re going to execute us, and put bets on it like it’s a competition.”

Jimmy gently took the blueprint from her, and gathered up the rest of them as well. He put them back into the folder, solemn and silent. No one spoke. Although, really, what was there to say that the three of them were not already thinking?

Lizzie was the one most outwardly letting her anxiety shine through. Her furrowed brows and her deep set frown were glaringly obvious. Grian hated it for her, hated how he knew what she was picturing — Joel standing in front of this same list of blueprints and being made to carefully select the sword with which he would murder his girlfriend.

There wasn’t enough air in the room for them to continue discussing. It’d been drained the second it was implied that their lives had a price tag on them. Suffocated and lost as to where to go next, how to rejuvenate them, how to reassure them, Grian could only watch as the other two Bamboozlers gathered their things and left. His apartment was quiet again.

Grian had returned to his chair at Scar’s bedside. It began to rain.

The dreariness went on and on and on, with no end in sight. Grian had a shift that evening, so for the hours leading up to it, he was occupied only by the incessant downpour. Thunder grumbled across the sky, and lightning left highlighted shocks behind his eyelids.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, just that he did, at some point, rouse from it. Grian had dozed off with his head resting on the mattress and his spine hunched over, manifesting in him as an annoying tension now.

The waking world posed little difference to the nothingness in his dreams. It was the same grey sky, the same silent room, the same dull glow from the lamp on the table beside him. Remaining in that floating quiet between unconsciousness and clarity was easy, listening only to the static of the air around him whilst gazing out the window.

Until, of course, a touch to his wrist launched him back into the present.

Grian's head whipped around, and he found a hand covering his own, large and calloused and warm. Then, he saw green eyes, squinting against the light and forcing themselves to open. He nearly jumped out of his chair to lean over, offering Scar his full attention.

"Grian?"

The vet bit back a gasp at the sound of his name. It was offset by the hiss of the oxygen mask, but it was real and there and said in a voice he would never fail to recognize. Grian smiled. "Hi, Scar."

Scar's lips tipped up beneath his mask, slow and barely there. It was almost a return smile, almost a full expression, almost something coating his face that wasn't fear or pain. But it stopped as he seemed to notice something. His head lulled to one side, and his breathing picked up. Grian followed his gaze, finding him to be looking at Jellie, who was curled up by his side, fast asleep.

"She's here," he said, light and soft with astonishment. "Oh…"

Scar gently pried his hand out from underneath her, causing her to raise her head and blink sleepily up at him. Grian's chest squeezed as

she bumped against his hovering fingers, mewling softly — as if she were aware of how fragile a state her owner was in, and didn't want to be too forceful.

Jellie let out the most delighted purr as Scar began to scratch behind her ear. It was brief, as the repetitive motion and awkward positioning wasn't something he had the energy to maintain, but the cat enjoyed it all the while. The rumbling resonating from her could've been a plane taking off or a consistent rolling of thunder overhead. Even when Scar lowered his hand, and turned his attention back to the vet, she remained visibly content, eyes closing again.

Grian's heart felt full to bursting. He could hardly hold back the torrent of emotions that swept through him after days of watching the cat cuddle up to her owner in desperation. His vision blurred as tears came forth, for once not spurred on by grief or loss.

Scar's face scrunched, and he blinked a couple of times, as if trying to process what exactly he was seeing. Quietly, he started to ask, "Grian?"

"Yes?"

Scar watched him closely, mouth opening in what could almost be read as astonishment. "Are you… crying?"

The question shocked a huff of laughter out of Grian. He reached up to wipe at his eyes, trying to rid them of the few tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks. "You shouldn't be worrying about me, Scar. Not right now."

Scar seemed to disagree, oxygen mask fogging as he muttered something quiet and breathy.

Suddenly, he began shuffling around, getting one elbow underneath him to sit up. His hand left Grian's to assist in that process, and soon he was basically upright, flinching a little bit with each inch of progress made. Grian helped him too, keeping him stable and preventing him from knocking anything vital loose. As soon as the injured man was satisfied by his own verticality, he set his sights back on Grian.

From this new orientation, trained eyes could better see the way Scar swayed a bit, and the sluggishness in each of his blinks. He was conscious, speaking, responding, but he wasn't fully over the daze of his condition. His perspective, as well as his actions and comprehension, would probably be subpar at best for a while longer.

"I don't want," Scar croaked when he finally found his words again, voice still hoarse and lungs struggling to keep up after his exertion. "I don't want you to cry, G."

Grian smiled wider. "I'm sorry. I'll stop now."

Scar made a noise of protest, before coughing as the effects of speaking through his mask caused his lungs to revolt. With fumbling hands, he pushed against the plastic covering, and Grian helped him take it off. As soon as that was resolved, he leveled the vet with a look that was about as stern as someone dizzy from a fever could manage being.

"What's wrong?" He rasped. One of his hands came up and landed squarely on Grian's shoulder, squeezing there. Scar tugged weakly, and the vet let himself be drawn in. They stopped inches apart, but Grian was too caught up in the bliss of Scar's conscious state to care about proximity. "What is it? What made you upset?"

“Nothing. I’m perfectly alright,” Grian promised, because in a world where Scar was awake and speaking to him, he couldn’t imagine a single thing being wrong ever again. To ensure he was heard, the vet took his companion’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m just happy to see you.”

Scar didn’t respond immediately, blinking down at their point of contact. There was an uptick in the beeping of the heart monitor, enough to draw Grian’s attention and cause him to frown.

It seemed the heart palpitations were starting again. He should’ve expected as much — Scar rarely woke without reason. These moments were nearly always accompanied by pain and suffering. Grian squeezed his friend’s hand tighter as they seemed to increase in force and Scar’s breathing became labored.

“Deep breaths, man,” Grian whispered. He studied his friend’s face. “Are you hurting right now?”

Scar seemed startled, mouth opening and closing multiple times. Finally, he stammered, “Maybe a little? Nothing, uh, too bad though.”

Grian hummed, lifting his free hand to rub circles into the other’s shoulder. “Don’t strain yourself. I bet it’s all the pent up stress in your body. You haven’t spoken this much in two weeks.”

If Scar’s heart monitor had been beeping rapidly before, it began to blare then. His eyes grew wide, nearly bulging out of his head. He echoed, “Two weeks?”

“Yes,” Grian said. “You’ve been in and out of sleep for a little over two weeks. This small dose of poison is stronger than I ever could’ve imagined.”

“Oh.” Scar stared at him, some of the glassiness leaving his gaze. He didn’t look quite as loopy or sluggish anymore. It was as if he were regaining clarity, regaining control, just a tad. Grian had a feeling that a notable amount of progress had been made right in front of him. “I was gone for… two weeks?”

The vet’s smile lessened at the sound of Scar’s quiet horror. “It’s okay. You weren’t *gone.* You’ve just been sleeping. I’ve been with you the whole time, making sure you’re alright.”

He’d hoped saying that would help, hoped that would be enough to comfort the fears of someone who’d believed themselves to have lost two weeks of their life to sleep. He didn’t know what those two weeks felt like to Scar, if they dragged on or went by in a flash, but he hoped with everything he had that they weren’t as memorably awful as he’d seen from the outside. At least then, he thought, Scar might be easier to calm down, easier to cheer up, easier to comfort in the future.

He wasn’t expecting Scar to take on a crestfallen expression, for his hand to squeeze back against the vet’s own, for his other palm to raise and cup at his cheek. Grian drew in a breath, eyes searching the other for indication of why he was doing this, why he suddenly seemed so sad, why the room had turned into a blur around the two of them.

“That’s why you’re upset,” Scar whispered, definite and filled with anguish. “You’ve been taking care of me… for two weeks.”

Grian leaned, involuntarily, just the slightest bit closer. Warmth radiated from the sick man’s palms, blanketing him in relief, comfort, tenderness. For the first time in two weeks, he felt the fatigue leave. Despite the rain, he felt the sun upon his face. Even with the happiness still clinging to him, Grian felt the overwhelming urge to cry.

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself say. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye, spilling down his cheeks like rain against a window. “I couldn’t take your pain away. I couldn’t make you better. You’re still sick.”

“I’m sorry too,” Scar said, thumb brushing against the evidence of their shared grief. “I’ll try harder now. I’ll get better. For you.”

They stayed there for a moment, simply quiet. Grian didn’t cry anymore, and Scar didn’t make him. The minutes stretched, and the rain kept falling. Jellie was still purring.

When Scar went back to sleep, it was with his fingers curled around Grian’s own, and a promise to wake up again soon settled on his lips.

The world kept turning. Grian wasn’t alone.

“He woke up today,” Lizzie said, practically slamming into Grian as he walked through the door.

Her eyes were wide, glimmering and only a little red. Energy pulsed around her like a crackling electrical storm. The rain had continued outside for the three days that followed the vet’s conversation with Scar, and she seemed to have embraced it to her core.

“Really?” Grian propped his umbrella against one wall, taking off his shoes and raincoat next. “For how long? Did he speak?”

The other two Bamboozlers, obviously, had been informed of Scar's waking for a second time as immediately as Grian could muster. Neither had broken through his door over that matter, but they did force him onto a group call and demand all the details. The vet fudged them a little, for the sake of his and Scar's dignity, but Lizzie and Jimmy were too caught up in the excitement of their friend being awake more often to care.

"Only about a minute or two," Lizzie said, shrugging. "But Scar greeted me, then, for some reason, he apologized, and went back to sleep. Oh, Grian, it was amazing!"

She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, not minding how it sent water droplets from his hair flying everywhere. Grian let her, a smile creeping onto his face as well, her joy contagious.

There was still a lot of tension in the air. Her boyfriend had yet to be proven innocent, and she was walking around with an inexplicable target on her back. To see her express any amount of happiness, find any amount of hope, fixate on anything aside from her luckless situation, was a welcome change. Grian knew it wouldn't last long, but for any duration as she was able to keep it going, the vet would entertain her.

"He woke up! Can you believe it? He woke up," she repeated. "Come, come. Maybe he'll sense that you're back and wake up again! That seems like something Scar would do!"

Faster than he'd seen her move in days, she dragged him down the hall and to the bedroom. Jellie was curled up in her usual spot, though she chirped at the sight of them. Lizzie was not the only one acting more lively with Scar's rejuvenation. The cat had been a lot better as well – eating more, drinking lots of water, even daring to leave her owner's side from time to time to lounge in the window.

Grian took his usual seat, with Lizzie rounding the bed to sit on the other side. She tucked her knees up onto the mattress and under her, twisting around so that she was facing both the vet and Scar.

"C'mon, *Doctor,"* Lizzie urged, a teasing edge to the way she said that particular nickname. "Work your magic. Wake him up. I want to see if he'll be loopy enough to believe he owes me money."

Grian rolled his eyes. He took in Scar's sleeping face, happy to see that it wasn't covered in sweat, or creased with pain. Lizzie had replaced the nearly-empty IV fluids while he was gone, and seemingly had changed the sheets as well. He appreciated the effort she'd put in to help out where she could.

The vet wasn't entirely sure what magic Lizzie thought he possessed — as she had no doubt brought him over with some semblance of serious intent, even if her statement had seemed to be joking. Still, Grian humored her, lifting his hand to trace over Scar's pulse point. The touch did earn him a slight twitch from the other's brow, but he didn't stir.

"My powers are weak today," he sighed, tossing a sideways grin at Lizzie. "Knowing our luck, he'll be up the second you're gone."

"You're right," she huffed, pursing her lips as if this were a genuine problem. Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. "Maybe I should just stay all night. We can have a sleep over."

As lovely as that mess sounded, considering the house's only bed was already occupied, and the closest thing they had to a guest bedroom was currently the width of his couch and on the floor directly over his shoulder, he wasn't too keen on letting her shift overlap with his.

Not to mention, Grian was tired and in need of a shower as quickly as he could get one.

His scrubs had blood on them, leftover from the surgery he'd completed a few minutes before clocking out for the day. An adolescent dog had needed a tumor removed, and while that had been relatively smooth, the poor thing had woken from anesthesia and spooked. The sudden movement had caused some of the stitches to come undone, and a decent amount of blood to soak through before it could be fixed up again. Though no vet could be truly bothered by messy events like those, it was never pleasant to be followed by the scent of iron all the way home.

"I'm afraid I'll have to turn you down for now," he replied, leaning back in his chair.

"What? Why?" Lizzie scoffed, "It would be so fun! We could paint each other's nails and doodle on Scar's face with permanent markers. He can't even look in a mirror when he *does* wake up, so really, that's a victimless crime."

"There absolutely *is* a victim," Grian reminded her. "Jimmy would have to wash that off him. I can practically hear him whining about it now."

Lizzie snickered and opened her mouth to respond. She was cut off by a clattering from beyond the room. Both of them turned as the sound of the front door opening, shutting, and locking reached them. Heavy footsteps fell against the wood, and then Jimmy was bursting in.

"Tim?" Grian perked up, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"Tango discovered something new. I wanted to catch you both before

Lizzie went home," Jimmy said. The bedroom door clicked shut behind him. "Sorry for interrupting."

"Oh," Lizzie whispered. "It's fine…"

Grian watched in real time as the shine left her eyes, the color left her cheeks, the smile left her face. At the slightest suggestion of news, she became a husk of herself. Inadvertently, Grian could feel his own walls raising — too used to the negativity these drops of information from Jimmy could bring about.

"Try not to jump to conclusions yet." The newly-arrived man sighed. "It's best to hear this with a clear mind."

Grian frowned, raising a brow. "Hear?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Since we weren't having much luck in the documents themselves, Tango took it upon himself to trace some of the non-encrypted phone calls made on the night we stole this drive," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall. "Specifically, he found an outgoing call from our favorite rich brat to the Agency. I thought you might want to hear it."

Jimmy pulled out his phone and turned up the volume. Lizzie and Grian straightened, eager. He pressed a button, beginning the recording.

"Hello? Hello? This is, uh, the CEO of Secret Keeper Corp. Listen, you need to put me through to the head." A man's voice came through the

microphone, heaving for breath and clearly fuming. He didn't give the person on the other end of the line time to respond before he was exclaiming, *"Now! It's urgent!"*

Right off the bat, Grian had a picture in his head of what this supposed CEO might look like. The man sounded older, and had a tone that reminded the vet of someone who always got their way.

Whatever secretary had been unlucky enough to receive the command seemed of similar opinion. *"Sir, we're pleased to hear from you today, but our head is already quite occupied managing the deployment of heroes to retrieve your stolen money. Do trust that the bank has already informed us the severity of this—"*

"I don't care about the money, *you dolt,"* the man shouted. Grian and Lizzie both reeled back at the sudden increase in volume and harsh tone. *"I need that USB drive this instant! Not even your beloved boss understands its importance! Get me on the phone with her this second or I swear I'll–"*

The sentence was cut off by a strange static as the distinct noise of heels clicking came through one end. A woman's voice spoke next, cutting through the static to say, *"Try to have a little decorum, Mr. Keeper. I'll be with you momentarily."*

Then, the call went dead.

Grian frowned, not entirely sure what to make of the brief interaction. Lizzie looked pale, though, and Jimmy's expression was grim, so he figured something important had happened. "What?" He asked, "What is it?"

"Not a lot, but," Lizzie said, taking a deep breath in and meeting his

eyes. “Don’t you know who that lady was? Right there at the end?”

“Uh, no,” Grian replied. “Should I?”

“I guess not. She doesn’t do interviews or anything. Her identity is basically completely unknown.” Lizzie hugged her arms around her torso, a haunted look in her eyes. “I can count on one hand the amount of times I’ve heard her voice. She encrypts all her calls, only meets with the heroes and the most elite. Pretty much everything we know about her is speculation.”

Grian listened, soaking in the information and trying to put the pieces together. It did seem familiar when he thought about it for a second longer. He just couldn’t put his finger on the exact person of whom this was reminding him. Luckily, Jimmy was quick to step up and fill in that blank.

“She’s the head of the Agency,” he said. “They call her the Watcher.”

The Watcher.

Now that name definitely *did* ring a bell.

It didn’t take a genius or someone super attuned to the business of the heroes to know who she was – the mysterious head of the Agency, the ghost in charge of the wellbeing of the entire city. Within the realm of the heroes, every move made, every command given, every rule changed had to go through her before it had a chance of being considered.

Practically nothing was known about her. She was only spoken about

with a level of hushed reverence, as if she were not quite human, but something more. The Agency's head was rumored to have kept her identity private to make a statement about her commitment to prioritizing the city over her own individual goals.

To hear even the smallest snippet of her voice in this call was not only exceedingly rare, but told them a lot about the situation. For starters, it implied that the CEO had yet to tell the Agency's head about the contents of the USB drive, and that she was in no rush to hear him out.

At least, that was the case several weeks ago. There was no telling what came after this short exchange, or if the CEO had gotten around to telling her since then, but this was valuable knowledge to have.

"There's another," Jimmy said, surprising everyone. He swiped to a new file. "Tango looked for more calls from the CEO, and found one that supposedly happened after the Agency refused to hear him out that night. He ran with his tail between his legs straight to the police."

The file had obviously been edited down from its original state to include just the important bits, as when Jimmy pressed play, the conversation was already well on its way. There were no pleasantries or introductions, only complaints and commands from a specific old man. They listened for a bit as he whined about the uselessness of their city's security systems, since his prized possessions weren't safe in a vault, even when he'd been promised they would be.

"I need your best men on this," he demanded. *"Since you've already failed me with that bank, you better not fail me again! I want those horrible little Bamboozlers behind bars this instant."*

"I apologize, Mr. Keeper," the person on the other end stammered. *"All villain-related issues are typically handled by the Agency, so our cops don't*

really–"

"I don't care," he hissed. *"I don't want help from the Agency. I need you to make sure that my USB drive doesn't end up in the hands of any superpowered freaks without my explicit permission! They'll kill me if I'm forced to go back on my end of the bargain because of this!"*

The clip ended – the rest of the conversation obviously being inconsequential – and Jimmy pocketed his phone.

"Who is he talking about there?" Lizzie frowned. "What bargain?"

"I don't know," Jimmy admitted. "But it doesn't sound like he wants the Agency to see what's on the USB drive either. Whatever deal he made with some unknown party seems to be acting independently from the heroes. Which means…"

The heroes weren't involved with the weapons scheme.

All eyes in the room turned to Lizzie. She slapped a hand over her mouth, tears springing to her eyes immediately.

"He actually didn't know," she whispered. "He's innocent. Oh *God,* he's innocent!"

She gathered her things abruptly, and started towards the exit. Neither of them tried to stop her.

"I *have* to go see him," was the only explanation they were given, and

then she was shutting the front door behind herself. Grian was left alone with Jimmy, a renewed energy filtering through the air.

"I hope it works out for her," Grian said. "She really loves that hero."

His hand twitched, aching to reach for Scar's wrist, to find his pulse point, to ensure he was breathing — something he tried not to do around the other two unless he was specifically taking note of vitals. They didn't need to know how nervous he was, how desperate he was for results. The urge had ebbed slightly with his small moment of coherency, but it would take a while to fully dissipate.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied. "It's a little off-putting."

Grian raised a brow. He wasn't expecting to hear something like that from Jimmy of all people, who was so infatuated with his roommate that it was hard to believe they weren't already well into a relationship with one another. "Off-putting?"

"Just mentioning him makes her mood shift," Jimmy said, nose scrunching a bit as he shrugged and stared longingly at the closed bedroom door. "We've known each other for so long, but there's this whole part of her that I don't understand now."

A part of her that he didn't understand.

Grian watched Jimmy closely, memories of their first interactions flashing through his mind – how hesitant this member of the Bamboozlers had been to accept him. Scar was alright with the vet so long as he was helpful, Lizzie kept him at an arm's length, but Jimmy was vehemently against receiving his help at all. It was odd to watch it happen again from another perspective.

“Timmy,” Grian called softly, and Jimmy turned his eyes onto him. “How would you feel if I told you that Tango was conspiring with the rest of the Tuff Guys to kill you?”

“What?” Jimmy straightened. “Grian, that’s hardly comparable to–”

“Humor me, Tim,” Grian insisted. “Tango wants you dead. Or, at least, that’s what I’m telling you. Would you believe me?”

Jimmy watched him, and relented slightly. “No, I wouldn’t… I *couldn’t* believe that, not in a million years.”

“Why not? He doesn’t tell you *everything* that’s inside his head,” Grian went on, leaning against the mattress. “I have it on good authority that he’s been faking all the wonderful things he tells you in private just to get you to lower your guard. He wants you and your friends dead.”

A beat passed.

“No, I still couldn’t ever believe that,” Jimmy retorted, jaw clenched as if he hated even imagining it. As expected, of course. Someone like him, with such a severe love for the handful of people that had gotten through his defenses, would probably despise such a hypothetical. It played into each of his underlying fears in uncomfortable ways.

“But you’d think about it a lot, wouldn’t you?” Grian pushed, though he knew this wasn’t pleasant for his companion. “It’d consume you. Seeing Tango’s face would remind you of what I said, to the point where you couldn’t stand to be in his presence. And when I finally approach you again, it’s with evidence that you were right – that this

person you love so dearly *hasn't* betrayed you."

Jimmy untensed a bit.

"You'd feel relieved, yeah?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "I probably would."

"So, you *do* understand Lizzie," Grian told him. "You love Tango in the same way as Lizzie loves her hero, as much as you try to deny it."

The other man flushed a bit at the bluntness, and tripped over a response. "I don't want to hear that from *your* mouth, man! I could say the same thing about you and…"

Jimmy trailed off, all fire leaving him as his gaze landed on the vet. Grian had, without realizing, let his hands drift. One was now tracing patterns into Scar's wrist, feeling for a pulse and remaining in place. The other had laced their fingers together, savoring the briefest touch.

There was nothing subtle about the action, nothing that could be misinterpreted. The unintentional movement was clearer than any words, any explanations, any purposeful expression could be. Jimmy's eyes flickered with a wave of realization, mouth opening as it set in.

"Yeah," Grian whispered, suddenly somber, suddenly honest, suddenly wishing for warmth. But Scar was sleeping, so his wish went unfulfilled. "You probably *could* say that about us. And I would understand it the exact same way."

“Oh,” Jimmy said. “I see.”

A tense silence settled over them. Jimmy took a step forward, hesitating like he wanted to say something, but his lips remained sealed.

Finally, with a sigh and a tilt of his head, he offered Grian a pat on the shoulder. Then, he withdrew, stepping out of the room, and after stopping to try to pet a curious Maui, shut the door behind him. It wasn’t long until the familiar sound of jingling keys indicated that he’d left the apartment entirely.

The vet squeezed Scar’s hand, letting some amount of easygoing peace filter back into the space around him.

“Good news is good news,” he told the sleeping man. “If we’re lucky, things will continue to get better. We just… have to hope.”

Grian lifted Scar’s knuckles and pressed his lips against them.

Hope.

He could manage enough of that for the four of them. He only had to endure this for a little longer. Only a little longer.

Scar woke more frequently, though rarely with the same amount of

clarity as he'd boasted during those earlier two interactions. Grian didn't mind, though. It provided a perfect opportunity for him to move on to more pressing matters, such as getting food into Scar's system.

Every time his companion's eyes opened, a timer started for the vet to get together a bowl of warm soup, and assist in the process of eating it until Scar couldn't manage it anymore. He wasn't throwing up as often, and he was regaining his appetite as the worst of his ailment had ebbed. If Grian timed it right, he could often manage to get around half a bowl of soup into his stomach before he was ready to go back to sleep.

Conversations were, of course, attempted during these periods, but they didn't go too wonderfully. Scar would smile, or nod, but long sentences weren't as plausible. Waking moments were primarily kept to medical interactions to conserve energy where they could.

Grian didn't let himself stress about Scar's lingering fatigue. Often, the process of getting better required quite a bit of push and pull. They'd taken some very large leaps very quickly, and now the other's body was rebelling – that was to be expected. It meant they were moving in the right general direction.

Unfortunately, in the same way that healing wasn't always linear, not all progress was pretty. Scar had less problems overall, but when the poison flared, it came back with an extra kick, sometimes lasting for hours at a time. The most notable example of this was a night in which Grian was in charge of watching Scar.

His patient woke four times over the course of eight hours, each a little less troublesome than the last, but still upsetting. Initially, he was roused by an intense coughing fit, remaining forcibly awake due to the tremors encapsulating his muscles. Grian managed to get him to eat a bit of soup, and drink some water.

The second occasion was an hour after Scar had fallen asleep again. He woke to wretch the contents of his stomach into the trashcan at his bedside. The steps made with the soup were quickly lost. Grian held his hair out of his face, and rubbed circles into his back.

By the third time, Scar was doing better, mostly just babbling incoherently and groaning in pain. Grian shifted him into a different position in hopes that would help, but it didn't do much. There were occasional heart palpitations, though none that lasted long enough to garner a large reaction from Scar. Gradually, the guy faded off into gentle snores.

It didn't stick. Scar woke for the fourth time not even two hours later.

He continued his halfhearted muttering, interspersed with vague sobs. Grian heard him whisper pleas for mercy somewhere in the mix, weak enough to break anyone's heart. The vet gave in and administered a sedative. He tried not to use them too often, lest it work against the tentative healing process they already had going on, but Scar was clearly in a rough patch.

Thankfully, the drugs did their job. Scar slept and did not wake again for a long while. Grian was able to finally relax, pretty confident this would do the trick. He hobbled over to his corner and slept until his alarm woke him the next morning.

After such a severe evening, Grian had risen shaky, disoriented, and feeling a little like he himself had been poisoned. His hands trembled, body ached, and his mind worked significantly slower than it might've otherwise.

For the first time in several months, the vet genuinely debated his

ability to go to work. His mental capacity was clearly suboptimal, and even by his standards, he'd gotten very little sleep. No animal deserved to be treated by someone in such a poor state.

Still, he wasn't the type of person who enjoyed calling out without a good reason. He hadn't done so since he'd initially met the Bamboozlers, and he had been haunted by paranoia to the point of sleeplessness.

But Mumbo *had* offered. And Grian *was* supposed to be taking care of himself.

So, he'd informed his coworkers, and like clockwork, Mumbo jumped to take his shift. Jimmy, who had been due to come in to watch Scar, was perfectly fine to sleep in a little longer. Grian got up, began his day with a cold shower, and then started breakfast.

His waffles had only just popped up in the toaster when he heard a noise from the other room — something like a groan and a shuffle of movement. He abandoned the kitchen immediately, speeding back to his room. As he opened the door, he was surprised to see Scar sitting up in bed, cooing down at a very pleased-looking Jellie.

"Oh," Scar gasped as the door opened. "Geez, Doctor. You scared me."

Grian did not respond right away.

First, he stopped to take in the sight of Scar. His hair was a mess, but his eyes were brighter than they had been during any other waking moment in the last several weeks. He'd taken off his own oxygen mask, and the glass of water looked half empty as well. The vet was instantly plagued with visions of Scar fumbling around with the medical equipment and only barely managing to drink water without

assistance.

He took his place by Scar's side, checking him over to see if he was alright, if he was hurting, if he'd messed something up in his delirium. But the guy seemed fine, and that haze that usually coated him when he woke was completely gone. Whereas previous bouts of wakefulness had just been interspersed with beautiful clarity, this one seemed to be ripe with it now, filled to the brim and overflowing.

"You're up," Grian whispered, amazed.

Scar smiled sheepishly, tilting his head. "Yeah, I didn't want to bother you when you'd only just left the room."

"You were awake for that long?" Grian frowned, feeling a bit bad that he hadn't checked before getting breakfast going. He eyed the man's vitals, glad to see that they were regular. "Are you in any pain?"

"Um, not too much," Scar hummed. He scratched under Jellie's chin, shrugging. "The cut on my side is a little uncomfortable, though."

Grian nodded. "It's about time for me to change the bandages anyway."

Figuring it best not the wait, the vet went ahead and took Jellie out of his hands, placed her off to the side, and then turned his attention back to Scar. After so long of dealing with him partially conscious or completely out for the count, he had gotten used to not really vocalizing what he needed. So, Grian didn't really think about what he was doing as he placed a hand in the middle of Scar's chest and pushed him down to the bed again.

He heard a sharp intake of breath, followed by the beeping of the heart monitor picking up significantly. Grian glanced up at Scar's face, surprised to see that it'd gotten a little redder. He trailed his hand up the other man's chest to his cheek, pressing his knuckles against the flushed skin there. It was warm, but not perspiring. His forehead was the same.

Grian raised a brow, confused. "Is something wrong, Scar?"

Scar swallowed, throat bobbing with the movement. He shook his head quickly, but seemed to turn an even darker shade of red. Grian put his palm back against Scar's chest, measuring his pulse and his breathing, finding both to be shallow and quick. It was highly likely his body was going through another subtle fit, though it didn't seem to be too outwardly painful, if his companion's demeanor was any indication.

The vet opted to move on. Scar was conscious enough to make his discomfort known should it become a problem. Besides, if the other got tired and tried to go back to sleep in the middle of his bandages being changed, Grian would lose a lot of currently-available convenience. Not that he had much trouble moving around a limp form anymore — he'd built up the slightest bit of muscle after supporting a grown man's weight for a few weeks.

Humming to himself, he trailed his hand down and pulled up the hem of Scar's shirt. With little fanfare, and paying no mind to the way the heart monitor increased *again,* Grian unraveled the old bandages and restarted the usual process. Luckily for him, it was an unconscious thing now, requiring very little actual mental energy. Not even his sleepless night could interfere with muscle memory.

The wound was hardly a problem as of late, mostly closed and working on healing. Honestly, the bandages now were more out of fear that it would inexplicably worsen again rather than anything else. They weren't vital at this point, but the vet was scared to quit a

routine that had clearly been successful.

For as long as the effects of this mysterious poison lingered in Scar's bloodstream, Grian was going to take any precautions necessary.

"So," Grian started, deciding conversation would be best to keep both of them alert. "How much about your situation do you remember?"

"Oh, uh…" Scar cleared his throat. He kept his eyes firmly glued on the ceiling. "Most of it. I remember wondering why there were no drones televising our fight, getting shot, feeling *terrible,* then passing out on your couch and waking up a while ago in here. Has it really been two weeks?"

"We're a little ways past three now, actually," Grian corrected, pity welling in his heart when he saw how that made Scar frown. He couldn't imagine it felt good to keep losing weeks of his life. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Scar replied, voice cracking a bit. "Although, I have been meaning to ask… Where am I?"

"Hm? Still at my apartment," Grian told him. He finished the bandaging, tying it off and pulling Scar's shirt back down. Careful to not hurt the man, he leaned over him so they could make eye contact more easily. "You're in my bed, currently."

Scar's mouth dropped open. *"Your* bed?"

Suddenly, he was jerking upright, in such an outlandishly clumsy movement that it had to have been involuntary. Grian hissed, worried about the other hurting himself. He placed a palm on the small of

Scar's back and helped him the rest of the way up.

"My goodness," Grian huffed. "What is *with* you today? Do you think you have all the stamina in the entire world at your fingertips or something? You're being reckless."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," Scar said, but his chest was rising and falling so quickly that it was hardly audible. Obviously, the physical strain had winded him. "I just… wasn't expecting your answer. That's all."

"Well, there's only so many places we could've put you," Grian grumbled. He double checked that the IV was in place, and that nothing else had been disturbed. "I apologize that it's nothing as luxurious as your Bam Bunker."

His comment was teasing, but Scar straightened, eyes going wide. "Oh, no! I wasn't saying anything like that! Your bedroom is very nice."

Grian snorted, taking a cursory glance around. His bedroom was, in his opinion, fine. It wasn't something he'd put an intense amount of effort into. The walls were a soft blue, with a white trim going along the outside. A plush beige carpet padded his steps, and his duvet was a rather simple collection of blue lines on a white background.

The furniture wasn't especially notable – a bed, dresser, desk, two side tables, and so forth – with the exception of a cat tower near his closet that Pearl and Maui literally never used. Two fake potted plants took up space in the emptier corners, replacements for the ferns he'd accidentally killed a few years back.

A collage of framed pictures hung on either side of the door, consisting of mostly him with his cats, or his coworkers. Grian had

one in particular that he enjoyed more than the others, in which Skizz was asleep on one of the examination tables at the clinic, and everyone on shift that day had taken turns stacking stuff on him to see how long it'd take him to wake.

The answer was two pet carriers, a whole desk worth of office supplies, most of Grian's bag of medical tools, and a *very* long time.

Now, of course, he also had the fun new decoration of a corner full of pillows. Scar's eyes landed on that after he'd surveyed everything else, and he seemed confused by it.

"Try not to judge it too much," Grian said. "Those are my sleeping arrangements until you're feeling more yourself."

"What?" Scar's jaw dropped. "You're sleeping *there?"*

"Your blood pressure is going to be a mess if you keep letting yourself get shocked quite so easily," the vet stated. "Besides, I think my makeshift bed goes very well with the decor. Don't you?"

Scar clamped his mouth shut, an amused twinkle to his eyes. "Yes. Obviously. You have wonderful taste, Doctor."

"Wow," Grian scoffed, faking a scowl. "I didn't realize that poison turned you into a liar on top of everything else."

"Don't be silly! I would *never* lie to you," Scar said, shooting the vet his signature crooked smile. The sight of it sent Grian's heart into orbit, quickly being committed to memory. "You might need a little professional help, but it's not out of control yet."

Scar snapped his fingers, shining with mischief.

"And, hey! Would you look at that? A professional interior designer is in your bed right now," he said, leaning closer with a smugness that permeated the air around him. "Feel free to use me to your heart's content, Doctor."

Grian's mind veered in a dangerous direction, one that was absolutely not suited to their conversation. He chose to roll his eyes rather than voice it. Reaching up, he gave the other's cheek two condescending little pats. "I'll think about it."

Scar grumbled something about being unappreciated, and allowed the vet to have personal space again.

As much as he was being a bit of a nuisance, Grian *was* glad to see Scar this upbeat and energetic. There was a fairly good chance he would actually stay awake for longer than usual today. If that was, in fact, the case, then Grian had a few things he needed to do. "Are you hungry?"

"Hungry?" Scar glanced down at his stomach, like he was expecting it to answer for him. "Um, I could probably eat. Nothing huge, though."

"Of course not," Grian agreed.

He stood, excused himself, and headed into the kitchen. Through the closed bedroom door, he could hear Scar sweet-talking his cat. The intention had been to quickly prepare some soup, as that was likely the most his patient's stomach could handle. However, now that he was seeing just how aware of his surroundings Scar really was, Grian

had a new order of business.

His phone rang a couple of times before Jimmy finally picked up. His voice was groggy as he muttered a small, *“Hello?”*

Grian remembered that Jimmy had gone back to sleep, assuming he was free of his duties for the day. He apologized inwardly, but figured the other man would be *much* more interested in this new development.

“Tim, I need you and Lizzie to get to my place as soon as you can,” Grian said, balancing the phone between his cheek and shoulder while he got his pre-prepared soup out of the fridge. “There’s someone here you’ve been waiting to see.”

It wasn’t twenty minutes after he hung up that a rapid knocking started at his front door. Scar was startled, nearly spilling his half-eaten bowl of soup all over his lap. Grian was quick enough to catch it, thankfully, moving it to the side table temporarily. Scar gave the vet a questioning look when he didn’t bother to get up.

“The knocking is performative,” Grian told him. “They have keys.”

Scar’s brows furrowed. “Who are you–?”

“Scar!”

The bedroom door was flung open, causing Jellie to scramble under the bed. Two familiar faces burst through, huge grins coating their expressions and a few tears spilling from their eyes. Both Lizzie and Jimmy looked a mess – the latter being fully dressed in just a winter

coat and pajamas, and the former having mascara running down her cheeks.

Scar had half a second to process the appearance of his friends before the pair of them were sprinting over and throwing themselves at him. Grian shrieked, dodging around some stray limbs. A chorus consisting of laughter and sobbing rose in the room around them as they collapsed atop their formerly-unconscious friend.

“Jimmy, Lizzie, I swear,” Grian hissed, nearly pulling his hair out at the amalgamation of body parts and careless weight distribution. “If you’ve torn out his IV or reopened the wound that I *just* got to close, I’ll kill you!”

“I’d like to see you try,” shouted Jimmy in response, sniffling through a few globs of tears.

“Relax, buzzkill!” Lizzie shooed at the vet. “He’s fine! Let us suffocate him with our love in peace!”

Grian gaped, unsure of what to do. His anxiety was through the roof, stress levels immeasurable. All he could see when it looked upon the bed was an accident waiting to happen. He managed to catch Scar’s gaze amidst the chaos, and the man offered him a watery smile. The emotions had obviously gotten to him as well.

Wanting to hear the answer from his lips directly, Grian slumped and whispered, “Are you *sure* this is okay? Doesn’t it hurt?”

“It’s perfect, G,” Scar replied, soft and sweet and coated in honey. “Promise.”

The vet sighed, but relented. To minimize his own stress, he stepped out of the room. Those three deserved a private moment, anyway, and Grian knew Lizzie and Jimmy wouldn't ever *actually* hurt their friend while he was still recovering.

He retreated to the living room, and fell into a cushionless chair. The trio chattered away down the hall, loud as can be. The sound traveled, bouncing off the ceiling, sliding along the floors, encapsulating his brain in a cacophony of buzzing.

Grian loved it.

These were the sensations of people, joy, and *life* in general that occupied his home. Rather than the quiet dread of sickness, the muted shadow of near-death, Grian had explicit proof of four people living, breathing, improving under his roof. It was impossibly beautiful.

Figuring he was probably being a little strange by just sitting and listening to the people in the other room, Grian turned on his television. The news was on, but there wasn't any particularly interesting story. He switched the channel to another station, pausing when the reporter there said something about the Bamboozlers.

"The city sleeps in tentative silence recently as the notorious criminal group known as the Bamboozlers officially goes another full week without a single sighting," the man in the crisp suit said. *"Could this be the start of a more peaceful era for our city, or are they simply planning their next big break? An interview with one of the local heroes may have the answer we're all craving."*

Grian sat up a bit straighter as the camera cut to show a sidewalk interview with a familiar face. The news program hadn't gotten Necromancer or Morphling to comment on the situation, but they *had* managed to land another member of the Gs.

Cloaked in red, with a mask over the lower half of her face, Daybreak stared into the camera, blue eyes glinting with a silent disdain. There were little wings painted over her eyelids, fluttering with each annoyed blink. She was tall next to the reporter, nearly dwarfing him. The long, flowing fabric of her costume – which resembled in color the exact moment right before the sun crested the horizon – did nothing to distract from that fact.

Her hands were on her hips, perfectly displaying her two signature sickle blades that were attached and flared out on the under sides of her armored sleeves. They were sharp and shining in the morning light, though each was slightly smudged, like she'd wiped the blood off them haphazardly before stepping into view of the camera.

"Thank you for allowing us to chat today, Daybreak! We just wanted to ask a few questions regarding the city's most wanted criminals," the interviewer asked, far too chipper in order to parallel the death glare his interviewee was sending the audience. *"Does the Agency have any theories as to why the Bamboozlers haven't shown their faces in several weeks?"*

Daybreak's brow twitched. *"Why do the Bamboozlers need to show their faces every week for the people to be content? Do you not want them gone forever?"*

Grian saw the interviewer's smile tighten. If it weren't for the live broadcast, they probably wouldn't have allowed that rude response to air. *"Apologies, Daybreak,"* he said, recovering swiftly. *"We didn't mean that we wanted the Bamboozlers around, but don't you think they're often planning something big whenever they go into hiding like this?"*

"I'm not worried about that," Daybreak said, gaze stony and cold. There was, now that Grian was looking closely, a bit of blood staining her black mask, and another speck of it beside her eye, like some sort of

twisted beauty mark. *"There is no threat the Gs – the* Agency *– can't handle."*

"Quite right, quite right," the interviewer agreed. *"Although, a few civilians were curious about the last sighting of the Bamboozlers, which was over too quickly for our drones to get there and record it. We were told by onlookers that the Gs were present, so we were hoping to hear what happened–"*

"It was a fight. Nothing special," Daybreak interrupted, visibly irritated. *"Speaking of fights, I was under the impression that this interview would be asking me about the robbery I just thwarted, not the criminals I haven't seen around town in a few days. Why don't we move the topic away from mindless gossip for once in our–"*

The news feed switched abruptly.

Grian stared at the screen as a commercial for some innocuous product rolled over the screen. The immediate thoughts that came to him were ones he'd possessed for the majority of his civilian life. They were ideas that, had he not had this villainous perspective on life recently, would've been the only conclusion that he would've reached.

Those being, of course, that heroes were frequently badgered about issues that seemed of no importance to the situation at hand. Daybreak was right to be frustrated that an interview about her achievements was overshadowed by the Bamboozlers quite literally doing nothing. It wouldn't be the first, or the last time the newscasters would be critiqued about their priorities.

Then, there were the thoughts that came to him secondarily – the type that were far heavier than mindless civilian discourse. Those parts of him that had been learned after months of standing beside the people the city wished to destroy focused much more on the aspects of the

conversation that Daybreak had been avoiding.

She wouldn't give any answers that would spark the city to anticipate the Bamboozlers' return, almost as if she were aware of the fact that the villains were not taking a break of their own free will. The point in which she had forced the interview to end had also been interesting. The interviewer was searching for details to a fight that wasn't publicly broadcasted, the very one during which Scar had been shot with a poisoned arrow.

And Daybreak hadn't even let them skim the topic. Almost as if she didn't want the media to be aware of what happened. Almost as if she knew more than she was letting on. Almost as if she knew exactly how intentional the arrow had been.

Which made sense to a degree. Necromancer, her teammate, had been the one to fire that terrible shot. Only the Gs had been present that night, with no media or civilian footage to account for what took place. It would make sense that the heroes on site would be aware, would be knowledgeable.

But Grian couldn't shake an uncomfortable question.

Why would the heroes lash out like that as revenge for having lost the drive, while the Watcher appeared to have no idea what files were even at stake? Why would the head of the Agency give a command to use force that bordered on lethal, something she pointedly avoided doing before, to protect information she wasn't privy to?

Had they missed a detail? Was it possible the phone call they'd intercepted only told them half the story? Was there more going on behind the scenes than they could ever imagine? Were the heroes, including Furioso, really as innocent as they thought?

Grian couldn't breathe. He stood up, walking back towards the bedroom. This needed to be discussed, needed to be heard by multiple ears. The trio might be able to provide a lens into the issue that a plain vet like himself wouldn't have. This could be necessary for them to reach the right conclusion.

He took the doorknob in his hand, but before he could twist it open, a chime of laughter once again stole his focus. It was Lizzie – jovial and real and full. Jimmy had told some joke, some little stupid comment, and she was mocking him with her whole chest while he protested loudly about it.

Grian stopped dead.

After days on end of sadness and longing and distrust, that intercepted phone call had given Lizzie back a piece of herself that was almost broken forever. Her love for her boyfriend, her faith in his innocence, her want for his ignorance were finally justified by the fact that the Watcher didn't seem to know the CEO's plans.

Now, Grian was going to waltz back into her heart and crush it at her most vulnerable. And for what? A conspiracy? A possibility? Something that he couldn't confirm, couldn't back up with evidence, could only fret over because of a line of subtext?

Grian opened the door. He saw three smiling faces, and he chose not to speak. He simply watched them.

Jimmy was incredulous, halfway bent over the bed in an attempt to swat at Lizzie. She was sticking her tongue out, copying his every spoken word in a high-pitched teasing tone. Then, there was Scar. He was between the two of them, the biggest grin in the world dancing

across his face. His eyes gleamed and creased at the edges, nothing but pure, unfiltered fondness spilling from them.

And when his gaze landed upon Grian, spotting him amidst the chaos, it seemed to swell into a tidal wave. The vet was caught beneath, stuck simply waiting to be crushed by the force of all that happiness sent his way. A whirlpool opened in his gut, twisting and beautiful and dangerous.

He didn't say anything about the news, about his thoughts, about the way the world might be planning to hurt them.

Grian couldn't do that, couldn't interrupt this, couldn't spoil their fun. If they made the same connections, it would be on their own time, at their own pace, or maybe it wouldn't *be* at all. Maybe nothing would become of this. Maybe the vet was overanalyzing. Maybe everything would work itself out.

He stepped in and proceeded quietly towards the bed. Only Scar noticed him, the others too focused on their squabbling. Green eyes tracked Grian as he drifted around them, and paused at the bedside table. He gestured at the bowl that waited there, and asked quietly, "Are you going to finish this, or can I take it?"

"I'm done for now," Scar replied, equally as soft. His expression smoothed around the edges, shifting into something private and almost reverent. The golden morning light made his eyes resemble the most vibrant forest leaves, and emphasized the full pink of his lips, chapped as they were. "Thank you, Doctor."

The gratitude seemed to extend further than towards the removal of a measly dish. It was his thanks to Grian for his care, for his attentiveness, for helping him get to a point where he could be reunited in sound mind with his friends. All of that delivered with a

blindingly brilliant smile made Grian's heart lurch against his ribs, his hands itch to reach out, his mind spin with untold want.

He picked up the bowl, the sudden urge to flee building in his chest. Grian excused himself, ignoring how every bone in his body longed to stay near that bed, near that man, near the axis upon which his world revolved. He shoved it down and made his way into the kitchen.

Grian had only just put the dish in the sink when an unexpected release of sparks traveled up his spine and forced him to lean his whole body weight atop the counter. He heaved for breath, lungs empty. Butterflies ran rampant through his stomach and chest, his heart beating uncontrollably.

Worse than that was what his mind had decided to conjure up for him.

It chose that exact moment, while he was still reeling from the wonder of being the subject of Scar's fondness for a single second, to remind him of a night so long ago. He could practically feel the cool wind of the evening, the warm press of a body, the sensation of lips on his. He remembered vividly the arms surrounding him, the inability to focus on anyone else, the total sense of security, despite the lurking danger.

The vet didn't know what to do with this influx of adrenaline. Scar's injury hadn't been long after his realization that these emotions existed, and he'd only dealt with them face-to-face a handful of times. His feelings, his infatuation, had been put on the backburner as the other man's health took priority.

Now, though, Scar was getting better. Now, he could talk and laugh and smile at Grian in that same terrifying way. Now, there weren't large batches of unconsciousness behind which the vet could hide.

And *God,* did he want to act upon these feelings. He wanted to grab Scar, kiss him until neither of them could breathe. He wanted to hold him close where no lethal weapons or malicious heroes could reach him. He wanted to see that smile every day. He wanted *Scar.*

But Grian couldn't do that. Even if there was significant improvement, Scar was still sick. It didn't matter that the vet was fairly certain there would be reciprocation, and that it would all work out. Until Scar was well enough to not need to rely on him for everything, well enough that no room remained for any sort of inappropriate power imbalance, Grian couldn't give way to these feelings.

He needed to remain professional, stoic, and careful. Once they were past this, once they were able to pay attention to their mutually beating hearts and the tension in the air, this could be resolved.

Until then, Grian would wait and he would want from afar, just as he'd always done.

Chapter End Notes

THANKS FOR 140K HITS AND FOR ALL YOUR SUPPORT!!

It's been a very busy week for me, to the point where I almost delayed posting this for a day or two, and next week is just gonna be crazier. I'm moving, so my schedule is all over the place, and writing 11k words a week really does get difficult at a certain point lol! I've done so much editing to the contents of this fic behind the scenes to make it more enjoyable that a lot of my prewriting is null, meaning I truly am just going crazy on the google doc every week rn. That being said, if things are delayed in the future, just be aware that this is why!

As always, follow my beta readers, Cody and Smiif! Nothing is possible without them!

I have a discord server, which can be joined here! For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or

tumblr! See you next Tuesday!!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> PLEASE READ THE END NOTES FOR SOME VERY VERY VERY FUN ANNOUNCEMENTS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was hard to say if life got more or less hectic in light of Scar's new consciousness. In some ways, it absolutely was easier for the three in charge of caring for him. Problems could be voiced more accurately, no one had to worry about lifting a limp form as often, and he was able to keep down medicine, water, and food much better.

The new issues on the table, however, were far more abstract than what could be solved with basic bedside manners. For example, Scar's spurts of energy did not seem to follow any specific pattern or match up with the expected circadian rhythm.

It made sense, in hindsight, when accounting for the times in which he would jerk awake in the middle of the night previously due to the effects of the poison. Their new routine worked in much the same way. The only difference now was that he was mentally aware during each of those occasions.

And while that didn't sound like the biggest deal in the world, Grian could never emphasize enough how utterly *strange* it was to be woken up in the middle of the night by a grown man staring down at him.

"Sorry, Grian," Scar apologized the second Grian opened his eyes on one such occasion. He had grabbed the trash can from the floor next to his bed and was cradling it to his chest. His dry heaving had been what had caused the vet to stir. It was, however, the sound of his voice and immediate attention that made him jerk into the land of the waking completely.

Groggily, he sat up, praying his bedhead wasn't too terrible. "It's fine," he said, ignoring how badly he wished to turn over and go back to sleep. "You feeling okay?"

"Super nauseous, actually," Scar croaked, resting his chin on the edge of the bin. "Nothing you can help with. I didn't– *ugh*… mean to bother you."

Grian wanted to agree with the sentiment — there really wasn't anything he could do to ebb the other's nausea, and therefore, he didn't have much of a reason to be awake at all. He wanted to be upset about the fact that he was, wanted to have the strength to turn over and go back to bed. Except, he couldn't, because this was Scar, and Grian never actually wanted to ignore when Scar was hurting.

He stood without complaining and put himself in the chair beside Scar's bed. The sickly man gave him a strange look, somewhere between a frown and a smile. "What are you doing, G? I just said you couldn't really help with this problem."

"I know," Grian yawned. He leaned forward, propping an elbow on the mattress and resting his face in his hand. "But I can stay with you until it's over."

Scar's face softened. He smiled fully, and then allowed the nausea to overtake him again. Grian rubbed circles on his back while he heaved into his trash can. In the end, it took him another hour to actually throw up, and twenty more minutes of groaning about a stomach ache to fall asleep again. Grian stayed with him, watched as the crease between his brow dissipated, and unconsciousness took him again. Only then did the vet let himself go back to bed too.

It wasn't always quite so seamless, though. There were nights in which Grian would open his eyes to see the upright shadowy figure of Scar and startle.

For example, there was one such evening in which Grian vaguely registered the increased beeping of the heart monitor from outside of his dreamless slumber. He turned over, planning on just visually getting a read on the situation before drifting off again, but his blood went cold as his eyes landed on a silhouette.

Scar was sitting up in bed, highlighted only by the shallow light of the room around them. His arms were clawing desperately at his chest and noises like a zombie come back to life were ripped from his lungs. It shocked Grian, causing him to freeze from his place in bed. As his sleepy brain forgot his situation, he experienced the briefest second of fear traveling down his spine.

Then, the shot of adrenaline brought him back to the present, and he was rushing over.

"Breathing exercises, Scar," Grian chided gently. "Remember. Slow, deep breaths. Come on, do them with me now."

Luckily, it was rare that situations became bad enough for Scar to fail to hear him, as he had in the past. Once he'd begun the exercises, it was just a matter of waiting out the worst of the fit. It was nothing the two of them hadn't been through together before. Sometimes, that could take quite a while, but on this occasion, it was only a handful of minutes.

After his patient was safely confirmed to be over the majority of the pain, Grian felt inclined to ask a few questions. "What happened, Scar? Heart problems again?"

“Um, yeah,” Scar replied, breathy and distant. It was hard to see in the dim lighting, but his eyes were wide, and not really keen on remaining still. “Yeah, a bit? I think it was night terrors too. I woke up in a huge panic and then it escalated, y’know?”

“Night terrors?” Grian leaned forward, intrigued and worried at the same time. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for a sick man to get nightmares, but these were the sorts of questions that couldn’t be asked to a person while they were unconscious for weeks. “Did you see something that particularly bothered you?”

His companion shrugged, sighing, “Not exactly. It was the kind of dream that only makes sense while you’re in it, but it’s silly when you’re awake. I’ve had a lot of those since getting shot.”

Grian hummed in vague acknowledgement. Silence settled over the room, the whisper of wind outside giving a subtle whistle. The vet wondered briefly if maybe the weather had something to do with Scar’s sudden nightmare, or if his current condition was indifferent to air pressure changes.

“I saw you there,” Scar said, seemingly out of nowhere. “In my dream.”

“Oh, really?” Grian replied, tilting his head, “I was in it?”

The vet realized he’d pried into something personal and unsavory when it caused Scar to stiffen, right in time with the rising beeps of the heart monitor. The recollection of the dream obviously disturbed him. Grian cursed himself inwardly for being too tired to think before speaking.

“You… were,” Scar said quietly, sounding almost as though he were forcing the answer out. “I couldn’t tell you what happened, since it didn’t make *sense,* but you were there with Lizzie and Jimmy, and I just… *knew* something bad was about to happen. Didn’t see it or ever get an explanation, but it woke me up, I guess.”

“Mhm,” Grian hummed. “Typical bad dream, it seems. I’m sorry it was bothering you.”

“No, it’s fine,” Scar replied, shuffling slightly. In the darkness, his hand ghosted over Grian’s arm, as if ensuring it was still there. That brief brush sent shivers up the vet’s spine, and a jolt of adrenaline through his veins. “It’s not real. You’re here, and safe. We’re both alright… So, it’s fine.”

Grian smiled weakly, though he was not entirely certain his companion could see his facial expressions. He let his own hand drift nearer to Scar’s, almost enough to imply the intertwining of their fingers, then stopped. At that moment, he remembered his inward promise to himself, to delay these feelings of his until both of them were on equal footing.

Even this one moment of contact, this one intimate touch disguised as a comforting gesture, was simply tempting fate. Giving in to these hidden intentions, especially when they could go nowhere for the foreseeable future, wouldn’t be fair to either of them. Comforting Scar was one thing, but he couldn’t let it go to his head, couldn’t let his wires cross, couldn’t confuse assisting his patient with nearness to the object of his affections.

“Yeah,” he whispered, pulling away in favor of resting his head on the edge of the mattress instead. “We’re alright.”

If Scar noticed his hesitance, his withdrawal, he didn’t mention it.

“Shouldn’t you go back to bed?”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Grian said. He wished he were a stronger man, wished his brain *could* think of sleep. His pulse was much too quick for any amount of relaxation. “I’d rather keep sitting here.”

Scar shifted, and put his head back on the pillow. “Suit yourself. Don’t complain if you end up with a crick in your neck, though.”

Grian didn’t reply. He stayed there, listening as Scar’s breathing evened out, his heart rate returned to a consistent rhythm, and the wind ceased its relentless whistling. Eventually, he too fell to the effects of sleep.

Of course, Grian had a crick in his neck the next morning, and of course, he complained about it endlessly. It was uncomfortable and irritating, but his voiced annoyances made Scar laugh every time, so it was — at least, the slightest bit — worth it.

Around five weeks after Scar had been poisoned, Grian finally felt comfortable removing his IV and oxygen machine from the equation.

The fluids themselves had been a precaution in case of large, unpredictable spurts of unconsciousness, and the oxygen mask accounted for issues with Scar’s air intake during his fits. However, both were redundant as he began waking consistently, keeping down food and water more often than not, and regulating his breathing with only minimal help.

Needless to say, Grian and Scar were equally excited for the

elimination of the needless tech from the equation. Even if they agreed that the heart monitor was useful for tracking worrisome attacks, and it needed to stay on a good majority of the time, this minor amount of freedom was well deserved.

"Alright, all done," Grian told him as soon as it was officially removed. Scar shook out his arms, wincing at the tightness that was sure to be there. "I'll keep the equipment around, in case the poison decides to be annoying again, but we're finished for now. How do you feel?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Scar replied honestly. "Uh, weak, I guess?"

"Hm, yeah," Grian sighed. "I suppose that makes sense. You're not totally better, and you've been stuck in bed for ages. We'll probably have to do some physical therapy to get you back up and used to your own legs again."

"Oh, I take it that means no villainous activities for a while longer?" Scar frowned, clearly already knowing the answer before he got it.

Grian confirmed his fear. "Not unless you want to trip over yourself and get caught in the most pathetic display of your life."

The vet stood to wheel the IV and oxygen tank over to a corner of the room where they wouldn't be in the way as much. Jellie watched him curiously from the cat tower – making good use of it where Pearl and Maui never had before. He supposed she probably liked it because of how little it smelled of the other two cats, who had lately taken to mewling at her under the door when they were bored.

"I've had some pretty pathetic displays in my life, man," Scar laughed. "More than I would ever admit to you. Getting dragged off because

my legs feel like butter might not even be in the top ten."

"Butter?" Grian shot an amused look back at him and crossed his arms. "I'm not sure that's the phrase."

Scar pursed his lips. "No, I think it is. Butter isn't very stable, and it can melt under pressure, so it wouldn't be a good material for legs."

The vet approached the foot of the bed to level Scar with a baffled stare. "It's *jelly.* Your legs would feel like *jelly,* Scar."

"Okay, if that's the hill you want to die on," Scar hummed, something glinting in his eyes. In an attempt to gauge what exactly it was, Grian rounded the bed and sat himself on the edge of the mattress by the other's hip. Mischief was waiting for him there, layered with another emotion that was hard to read. "We all have to be wrong sometimes, G."

"And I'm wrong, am I?" Grian gave him a playful scowl, dangerously aware of how it caused his companion's mouth to tip upwards at the corners. "There's no world in which you're the one that's mistaken? Is that what I'm hearing?"

"Obviously," Scar replied, sitting up straighter. It was only when his gaze slipped down Grian's face briefly that the vet realized how little distance was left between them. Suddenly, the air was thin, and the room was hot. "I'm always right."

The vet dug his nails into his palms to keep from doing something drastic at the sight of the grin that spread across Scar's lips. He tore his eyes away, forcing his mind to jump to a new topic. "Well, now that you're free of your IVs, what do you want to do first?"

“Now that I’m–?” Scar blinked, glancing down at himself. “Um, I’m not sure. Is there something I *should* want to do?”

“I can’t tell you what you want.” Grian shrugged, standing to give himself more control. He hoped his ears weren’t as visibly hot as they felt. “But your arms *are* mostly free now.”

“True,” Scar said. “I’m excited not to sleep in rigid positions anymore. Tonight is going to be great.”

Grian glanced around, attention wandering to anything beyond his companion, when an idea came to him. He snapped his fingers. “There is one thing that you might enjoy.”

Scar raised a curious brow.

“I know you’ve gotten pretty sick of those sponge baths Tim’s been giving you,” he reminded him, and gestured at the door. “All I’m saying is that it wouldn’t be too difficult to get you to a real tub if you wanted.”

Sponge baths had, predictably, become a little more troublesome with added consciousness. Jimmy continued his job diligently, but Scar was usually awake and aware for the whole encounter. It was always described as something necessary and appreciated, but completely awkward.

The idea of being independent enough to not have those be a requirement anymore was definitely an appealing prospect. As expected, the other man brightened the second Grian suggested it, a gasp leaving him. “Oh, wait! That *does* sound awesome! I could take a

bath all by myself?”

“Well, mostly,” Grian laughed lightly. “You’re still pretty tired, so getting there would be a process in and of itself.”

“Ah, right.” Scar deflated a bit. “Should I wait until Jimmy’s available to help me?”

Grian bit the inside of his cheek. “How long do you think it’ll be until that happens?”

“No telling,” Scar sighed. “These matters can take a while if the people we’re threatening feel like fighting back.”

Jimmy was unavailable for the time being, supposedly due to some sort of minor territorial thing to do with a group of criminals elsewhere in town. The vet didn’t understand the politics of the city’s underworld, but the Bamboozlers were allegedly pretty tied up in keeping it in order — enough that they could spend large amounts of time sorting it out.

Lizzie had explained that non-superpowered criminals getting too confident and attempting complex heists could often lead to security measures being put in place that wouldn’t otherwise have been implemented. That stuff could ruin or complicate missions for actual supervillains, people considered more qualified to successfully complete such daring tasks, by eliminating the easiest ways forward, only for the minor criminals to end up caught due to their lack of experience.

It was better, apparently, for the villain groups with the most powerful reputations to scare them away before they could cause that damage. Jimmy had received word from an informant that a local gang had

gotten too cocky, and was doing reconnaissance to figure out their plans. Once he had that information, he was going to work with Lizzie to ensure it never came to fruition, no matter what that took.

In Grian's opinion, all of that sounded like a very convoluted form of almost-vigilantism, but any vocalization of that thought resulted in Jimmy loudly whining, *"No, we're the bad guys! We don't do good stuff ever!"*

Either way, the point was that Jimmy wasn't available, and he wasn't going to be for a while longer.

Scar looked dejected, disappointed to have something like personal space and good hygiene dangled in front of his face. Grian hadn't meant to do that, but now that he had, he felt awful.

They weren't, however, totally out of options. Scar would need assistance to get to the tub, but Jimmy wasn't the only one capable of offering a hand there. Grian clapped, a decision made as easily as that.

"I'll do it," he declared. "C'mon, swing your legs over the side of the bed. Let's practice standing up."

What Grian had failed to account for was Scar's reaction to such a decision. His comment was met with a blank look, which transformed quickly into one of blatant shock.

"You'll… *what?"* Scar gaped at him. His heart monitor picked up, getting several beats above his usual resting rate. He indeed did swing his legs over the side of the bed, but only to let him better face Grian to gawk at him. "You want to… help me take a bath?"

The vet winced at the phrasing. “No, but it’s my job while I’m acting as your doctor to make sure you’re completely comfortable. You want to bathe, do you not?”

Scar paused, stopping and starting his sentence multiple times, before falling silent. His pulse increased yet again, and he raised a hand to where the device connected to his arm.

Grian didn’t hesitate to step forward and begin removing the heart monitor for him. Rather not let his patient attempt to rip it off while panicked by its incessant noise.

Its rapid beeping stopped all at once — a rare phenomenon for them. Grian set it aside carefully, and then stared down at Scar. They were close enough that their knees were almost brushing, but the vet maintained a steady height advantage due to the downward curve of the mattress. Scar’s green eyes were wide as he gazed up at Grian, and his mouth was tightened into a line, almost as though he were forcing himself to hide his true feelings on the matter. He looked beyond perturbed.

The vet raised a brow, not expecting a topic like this to be worthy of such intense thought. Was Scar worried about the idea of Grian seeing him in an embarrassing state? Was he — a man with a history of bragging about his good looks — acting shy about his appearance all of a sudden? Or was it another matter entirely?

“Is something wrong?” Grian put a hand on Scar’s shoulder, taking note of the way the touch made the other’s mouth twitch. “Would that make you uncomfortable?”

“Oh, uh,” Scar whispered. His eyes stayed locked on Grian’s own, but they shook like he was doing everything in his power not to look away. “No, of course not…”

Grian didn't believe him. His trailing off, hands folded deliberately in his lap, and shaky exhalations were enough proof that he was lying. It was oddly nostalgic to seek out those nervous tells again, after so long of focusing only on recovery. Unfortunately, the lie in this case was bound to be about the matter of bathing, and the vet's role in it.

Although, something was strange about his cagey attitude. Scar had to know that Grian would respect his wishes if anyone aside from Jimmy assisting in this process violated his boundaries. And yet, he wasn't giving an outright refusal or excuse. Scar was just stammering and nervous.

Nervous…

Grian watched his companion's throat bob as he swallowed. A dangerous notion occurred to him. Curiosity welled in his chest, begging to be fulfilled, begging for him to test the waters, begging him to remember his hypothesis from over a month ago.

Scar's eyes were wide, cheeks tinged a soft pink, lips parted just the slightest bit. He looked so off-balance, while simultaneously seeming like he was hanging onto the vet's every word.

And Grian, despite knowing his own promises to himself, despite wanting to keep his distance where he could, despite knowing better than to give in, was only human at that moment.

"Yes, of course. You've got *no* reason to be uncomfortable around me, right?" Grian hummed, as nonchalant as possible to prompt the best response. He let his finger trace lazy circles on the other's shoulder. "I mean, it's not like I haven't seen you shirtless dozens of times before when treating your older wounds. What's one bath?"

As soon as the statement had left him, Grian let his eyes dip down, and back up.

Like clockwork, Scar immediately flushed, red spreading from the bridge of his nose to the tips of his ears. Grian was fairly certain he'd hit the nail on the head. It seemed, even when still emerging from the effects of the poison, Scar was not immune to the strategies Grian had prepared prior. He managed to bite back a larger smile, but a teasing edge still snuck through the vet's defenses.

If he wanted, he could push further. Scar would *let* him push further. Grian could raise his other hand to cup his jaw, tilt his face up just the slightest bit, and feel their breaths intermingle with an undeniable ease. He could prove everything his heart desired to be true, could make it known to both of them, could put an end to this burning back and forth.

"Oh, um, yeah," Scar whispered, drawing the vet from his divisive haze. "Yeah, that's a good point. Why don't you, uh, help me up first, and we can get started?"

Grian's defenses raised, heart squeezing.

Scar still needed him. He still needed Grian to help him walk, bathe, and sort through medicines. There were duties and responsibilities to be fulfilled first. He was still a doctor to Scar, despite how badly he wanted to make their relationship unprofessional.

Grian put his desires aside, aware of how they simmered and how their embers threatened to grow into flames with more insistency recently. He could deal with them later, when he was alone. For now, Scar needed his attention, and he was loath to deny that man

anything.

“Alright,” Grian said. “Let’s go.”

He turned to the side and maneuvered Scar until he had an arm tossed over the vet’s shoulder. His hand landed firmly on the other man’s waist, taking the brunt of his weight to heave him into an upright position. It came with a fair amount of straining and a lot of failed attempts, but they did, eventually, manage.

Scar stumbled a few steps, Grian there to support him the whole way.

“Woah,” he gasped. “It feels like I’ve never walked before in my life.”

“That’s my fault,” Grian chuckled lightly. “I should’ve probably started the physical therapy stuff sooner. Believe it or not, humans work a little bit differently to animals when it comes to the recovery process.”

The vet discovered quickly that carrying a grown man from his bedroom down the hall to his bathroom was actually a lot harder than it seemed in his head. Scar was uneven, and though he wasn’t dead weight, his fumbling feet were almost worse for navigation. They bumped into the same hall table three times because of that fact.

“The bathroom’s not far from here, right?” Scar shot him a sheepish smile. He’d begun to take slow, deep breaths to regulate his own heart rate, which had to be skyrocketing with the exertion. His stamina for physical exercise was bound to be significantly reduced as well. Even a few steps was enough to cause them to need a break. “I’m not sure I can handle much more.”

“Y’know, it definitely feels a lot further when I’m carrying someone else around,” Grian mused, earning a small laugh for his troubles. To be entirely honest, his muscles did burn a bit, but he wasn’t as quick to falter as he might’ve once been. His efforts were not without merit. Though, he wasn’t perfect either. Scar was heavy, and they’d both thrown themselves right into a strenuous activity without much preparation. “Next time, I’m gonna slowly work you up to walking like this.”

“Yeah, I think I’d appreciate that,” Scar panted, leaning against the hallway wall for a moment to rest. His legs wobbled, and a sheen of sweat was beading at his brow. Grian would’ve wiped it away, but he didn’t have the hands to spare. It could wait. They were close to the bathroom, as tedious of a process as it was, and therefore, close to a place to relax. “At least, this is… teaching me my new limits.”

“One final push, and then I won’t make you do this again,” Grian urged. “Come on.”

They got away from the wall and stumbled those last few steps through the threshold of the bathroom. Scar slumped completely into Grian, allowing himself to be settled on the edge of the tub to take a breather.

“Oh my goodness, G,” Scar huffed, leaning his head against the tile. “That was *rough.* I used up all the energy I had.”

“Well, on the bright side,” Grian pointed out. “You can take that bath now!”

“Yeah, right,” Scar rebuffed, nose scrunching. “I don’t think I can even lift my arms long enough to wash my hair. As nice as it sounds, a bath might be out of the question.”

Grian's mouth clicked shut. True to his word, Scar's arms were shaking in a similar fashion to his legs. It was the most strain those appendages had experienced in weeks. They'd definitely made a bad call by attempting this prior to physical therapy, and without any aides. Although, now that they were there, it would be a waste not to achieve their original goal.

The vet remembered something, and dug around in the cabinet below his sink until he found a large bag of epsom salts. It was a trick he used whenever he was in desperate need of relaxation, or the tension in his muscles got too intense. They weren't terribly scientific, but a little magnesium wouldn't hurt Scar by any means.

"We'll use this to help you feel better," Grian declared, presenting the bag. "You can soak for a while, and when you're alright enough, you can wash your hair and whatnot."

"Oh, Lizzie keeps some of this stuff at the base," Scar gasped. "Okay, sure, that could work! Just, uh, one last question…"

"Of course."

Scar flushed and glanced away. "How am I supposed to, um, get in the bath? I probably need help there too."

"Oh. Right. Huh." Grian frowned at the predicament, and looked around for a solution. He picked up a towel, passing it in Scar's direction. "If you think you can manage it, I'll turn around while you change, and then you can tie this around your waist. Should help with modesty a little, at least."

Scar agreed, and the vet spun around, listening to the sounds of hurried shuffling. The other man whispered quite a few expletives over the course of several minutes, obviously struggling. When Grian suggested giving him a hand, Scar rushed to say, “No, it’s fine! I’ve got it… Almost there!”

By the time he finally called for Grian to look his way again, his outward appearance reflected his frustrations. The way his cheeks were reddened from effort, and his chest was rising and falling displayed perfectly the amount of energy he’d poured into just getting through changing.

He was, at least, successful in his endeavors. His clothes had been thrown into a haphazard pile beside the tub. The towel was tied tightly around his waist, hanging down to his knees and ensured to be in place by a white-knuckled grip. The rest of Scar was bare, though it revealed nothing – as previously mentioned – Grian hadn’t seen before.

This instance was, however, in a slightly different context compared to all the other times. There was no blood, nor any fresh, horrific wounds marring the skin. The closest it got was the lingering remains of the cut from the arrow, but little else existed to distract from the full extent of Scar shirtless.

Grian saw defined muscles, weakened from being out of order, but too prominent to be badly withered away. Discolored patches of skin, similar to the markings that covered Scar’s face and arms, decorated his torso as well. He was littered with the remains of past battles – some of those being identifiable to the man in charge of treating them.

The vet’s mindset was also completely different from his usual professional mode. He wouldn’t, for example, previously have noticed any curves or attractive features. He wouldn’t have half a mind to let his eyes follow the outline of Scar’s collarbone, or have the

wherewithal to absorb the clear evidence of the other man's hard work in the gym.

Scar was built, to put it simply, the way a professional supervillain should be.

And he was, to borrow the words of another vet, really quite the sight.

Grian realized he was staring, and felt shame flare up in his gut, rising to his cheeks in the form of a deep blush. Scar would undoubtedly have teased him about his intense gaze, but the half-covered man was actively keeping his eyes averted. Apparently, he was just as embarrassed by the prospect of being undressed in front of Grian as Grian was about the fact that he didn't mind it.

The vet cleared his throat and forced his attention back to the bath itself. He turned on the water, waiting to adjust the temperature to something consistently bearable for sensitive skin. Once it was alright, he allowed it to fill up, then added the epsom salts.

"Okay," Grian hummed, steeling himself before turning to Scar again. "I'll help you in."

Scar didn't need too much from Grian to simply get into the tub, but lifting his legs to throw them over the edge was a bit of an issue. It required him to lean very heavily on the vet, which Grian did not overthink *at all.*

Once his companion was safely in the water, and actively breathing out sighs of relief, he stood. "Shall I wait outside for you to finish? That way you can have some privacy and just call me back when you need me?"

Scar nodded, basking in the warmth, and Grian excused himself. He pulled up a chair to wait in front of the door – in case his companion wasn't able to shout loudly enough to be heard from further away. He scrolled through his phone to pass the time, leisurely bending to pet Maui and Pearl as they came to check out his temporary setup.

His cats had gotten used to Jellie finally. Aside from occasionally trying to bother her under the door, they didn't seem excessively jealous when Grian emerged from his room smelling of another cat, and they weren't terribly interested in getting inside anymore.

He tried to spend a decent amount of time with them each day to make up for locking them out, but his two little brats barely noticed his absence to begin with. Even now, Grian was only able to brush along their backs as they lingered in his area. He gave up on attempting to be sweet, and focused fully on his screen.

Social media wasn't a platform to which he gave much thought. It simply wasn't interesting to him to scroll through other people's ramblings. He would much rather engage with a good book, write reviews for trashy movies, or call up a friend. Today was the rare exception where he had a very small void of boredom that needed to be filled by something equally as small.

So, he'd let himself give in to scrolling aimlessly for a bit. Mostly, it was nothing out of the ordinary. People with bad opinions, meaningless photos, and reports of real world events. Eventually, it was the latter of the options that he ended up reading into more than the others.

Particularly, he relaxed into the monotonous routine of perusing through various news stations' official accounts to see what they deemed important. In the midst of theatrical fights and superpowered politics, the city's reporters were notoriously biased towards the

dramatics. They liked to find ways to maximize conflicts to earn as much viewership as they could, and it worked more often than not.

For example, the first account had pinned a clip in which Furioso was, allegedly, caught stammering in front of an interviewer because he was asked a question regarding his taste in women. Grian made sure to forward that post to Lizzie, certain she'd find it funny if she hadn't already seen it.

Next, he found a post about the disappearance of the Bamboozlers, where several dozen people were using its comments as a place to speculate on a variety of topics only vaguely revolving around the villain group. They buzzed about things like Lizzie's clear skin through a series of screenshots of blurry drone footage, or Scar's remarkable ability to avoid getting dirt on his clothes during scraps.

One that caught his eye was asking about the cast seen on Jimmy's finger during their last sighting – wondering whether or not it would still be on when they reemerged, and how it had gotten there in the first place. Then, below it, the same user had posted another comment about the matter.

Posted 5 days ago by @user37737737

I'm just saying, it looks pretty professionally done… so… maybe they have a guy behind the scenes!!! My dad works in a hospital, and he says any reliable doctor would've been on the lookout for people with broken fingers after that incident with Boogeyman… Not a baseless theory…

Grian paused, rereading again and again, but he remained equally as surprised the fifth time through.

The general public, or at least this one person, suspected the trio had a doctor working for them. For some reason, Grian had never stopped to

consider that anybody might realize something like that. He supposed it *was* obvious. The Bamboozlers used to have much longer gaps in appearances when they'd get injured in battle, and now they were suddenly fine after only a few days, and sporting things like casts.

Jimmy's cast had been removed as of half a week prior, when Grian deemed it safe and the formerly-injured man declared it no longer pained him, but it seemed the damage had been done long before that. The vet didn't know what this meant for them – if it was bad, or even worth giving a moment of thought – but it certainly was surprising.

He glanced over the rest of the thread, but it mostly consisted of other users calling the original poster ridiculous for assuming any medical professional would risk their license for something like this. Grian was too caught off-guard to find it humorous.

Thankfully, he was drawn away from his phone by a call from behind the door.

"Grian? Could you come here for a second?"

Grian moved his chair and reentered the bathroom. Scar was smiling sheepishly. The towel was still over his hips, luckily, but the water around him wasn't soapy in the slightest. Whatever amount of washing he'd needed to get done seemingly hadn't happened yet. His suspicions were confirmed a moment later.

"Um, I think I might've pushed myself a little *too* far earlier," Scar admitted. "I can't really lift my arms, even with this lovely salt bath you've put together."

"Oh." Grian sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry. That doesn't sound comfortable. Would you like to get out and put a pin in this for the

time being?"

"Well, not exactly," Scar said, looking away. "My, uh, hair is really bothering me. The greasy feeling isn't one I totally enjoy. I was wondering if maybe… you could help me with it?"

Grian straightened. "You want me to wash your hair?"

Scar nodded. "If you're okay with it?"

"Yeah," Grian blurted, probably too quickly. "Yes, of course. Anything you need."

Scar tossed him a grateful smile, and shifted in the tub so that his back was to Grian.

The vet rocked on the balls of his feet, trying to get ahold of his mind. He felt a little out of his depth here. This was a physical boundary that he was about to cross, and a challenge for himself that needed to be overcome. His brain had been especially quick that day to toss aside its morals in favor of ogling, and lending time to unprofessional daydreams. He needed to lock that part of him up deep inside, lest he accidentally let something slip at the most awkward moment humanly possible.

It was just washing hair. That was easy — normal. In fact, it was an experience that should be *beyond* manageable for him. He'd given tons of medicinal baths to animals in the past. This would just be a much more controlled version of that.

Grian did his best to slip into work mode, preferring it to the

weirdness that had been plaguing him recently, and grabbed a cup from beside his sink.

In truth, for all he'd let himself worry over it, washing Scar's hair was a straightforward and repetitive process. Sponge baths hadn't really done the trick when it came to caring for the mop atop the other's head. This was, perhaps, the most care anyone had shown it since Scar fell sick. Grian took great pride in ensuring it was not a bad experience.

He was careful when wetting it to let as little water get into his companion's eyes as possible, and the only noise between them was of gentle splashing. Two or three times as much shampoo was necessary to truly get to the bottom of the grease, but Grian enjoyed the monotony of massaging it into his companion's scalp. Scar certainly wasn't complaining either. One quick peek proved that his eyes had shut at some point during the process. He looked perfectly at ease.

Grian carried on for a while longer, letting in more warm water when it seemed the bath was going cold. Honestly, it was entirely possible to have finished at a much quicker rate, but neither he nor the man bathing were in any rush to do so. After applying conditioner, and washing that away too, Grian stayed there, simply basking in the quiet comfort between them.

"Oh, did you finish?" Scar glanced up and over his shoulder. His eyes fluttered against the light, as if he'd actually fallen into a shallow sleep for the previous few minutes. The smile that split his face was like a summer breeze through an open window, soft and serene and solely for Grian. "Thank you. I don't know what I would've done without your help."

And Grian, because he couldn't trust himself to be any less sarcastic, tipped his head to the side and replied, "You would've died in an alleyway somewhere, probably."

Scar laughed, lovely and echoing against the bathroom walls. “Very true. Now, if my *savior* wouldn’t mind stepping into the hall for another minute, I’m going to wash the rest of me.”

“Right,” Grian whispered, ignoring how his heart skipped a beat at the thought of being anyone’s savior, let alone Scar’s, no matter how true it was. “Right, of course.”

Grian stood, bid farewell, and waited outside the door until his companion was finished. When it came time to get Scar back to his room, the vet fetched his wheeled office chair from its place beside his desk to make it much easier on the both of them.

He took note of the usefulness, and once he’d gotten Scar to bed, allowed himself a quick, discreet, online purchase.

“Good, one more time.”

Scar was careful to stand. His legs didn’t shake, and his posture remained fairly straight due to the chair he was using as a makeshift support. He remained in that upright position for a handful of seconds, and then gently lowered himself back down as they’d practiced.

“Ugh, this is so boring,” Scar complained, expression thoroughly unamused. “Old people in nursing homes probably have more mobility than I do.”

“You’re not wrong. Your bones are rickety for sure,” Grian teased, enjoying how it made Scar’s nose scrunch up in distaste. “But you’re looking younger by the minute.”

Physical therapy was going well, in Grian’s humble opinion — despite how his patient insisted that it was, in fact, the worst thing in the entire world. They’d made quite a bit of progress over the last handful of days, having started rather immediately after the incident with the bathroom.

Contrary to the previously pathetic attempt at movement, though, Jimmy was present this time around. He sat in the corner of the room, not really focused on either of them. His role was simply to help out if Scar fell and they needed to get him up, or position him a certain way. It was rarely necessary, but Jimmy didn’t seem to mind loitering.

For the most part, he simply zoned out with his own business — that business being, of course, the tattered vest of his fellow Bamboozler that he was sewing back together.

Jimmy’s hobby of sewing was actually significantly more impressive than Grian had originally considered it to be. Though the vet had only known about it in the beginning because he’d seen the other man’s kit in the bathroom at the bunker, it was more than just little stitches here and there. He was incredibly thorough when it came to fixing up this item of clothing. The color of the fabric was matched exactly with the thread, not even a minuscule hint remaining when he was through with a tear to suggest its existence in the first place.

Clearly, though he could be clumsy in other regards, Jimmy was capable of paying attention to the finer details when need be. His handiwork ensured all his teammates would be looking their best on the battlefield, no matter what weapons attempted to ruin their style.

Lizzie had apparently gotten quite aggressive during their little intimidation tactic against those amateur criminals. In the meantime, she'd accidentally ended up with her costume a bit roughed up. Grian hadn't been told the whole extent of the exchange, but allegedly, some of those rips were from her chasing a fleeing man through a barbed-wire fence.

According to Jimmy, she had used this ordeal as a way to relieve her stress from the past few weeks. The vet ignored these words, preferring not to think about how Lizzie's idea of relaxation was being so blinded by a murderous rage that she would disregard barbed wire in favor of a good hunt. He *also* ignored the amused expression on Jimmy's face as this had been relayed.

Though he was used to the antics of villains by now, Grian had concluded that sometimes turning a blind eye to their numerous red flags was the healthiest option for him. Besides, even if he did face them, very little would ever change his stance. He was well and truly involved — illegal tendencies or not.

Maybe that was selfish, or wrong of him, but it'd been too long since he'd last let himself crumble about his morals. With Scar sitting in front of him, nose crinkled in a way that was simultaneously hilarious and adorable, and Jimmy sewing in the corner, it was hard to really care about details like those.

This wasn't their first afternoon attempting exercises that involved getting out of bed. According to everything Grian had read before, stretches were the best place to start, and so they'd done exactly that. Exercises that focused on strengthening any deteriorated muscles, such as leg or arm lifts, were prioritized.

Scar was, however, antsy. He wanted to get up and moving as fast as possible. It was clear that being bedridden for so long was starting to weigh on him. Lizzie and Jimmy were purposely not plotting any schemes so he wouldn't feel useless, but the recent incidents with the

other criminals had nevertheless instilled that anxiety within him.

"Can't we just practice walking around more?" Scar groaned. "I want to be able to leave the room by myself at least."

"No," Grian hissed. "I told you that we're going to be doing this the right way."

"These exercises are so lame. I need some excitement, some spice in my life again," Scar said. He brightened, snapping his fingers. "We should make this like an action training montage, and you can tape a picture of all the heroes to a dummy for me to practice punching or something!"

Grian rolled his eyes. However, a knock on his front door drew his attention away. Both Scar and Jimmy bristled, the latter moving to stand. The vet stopped him. "Relax," he sighed. "I was due for a package today."

"A package?" Scar frowned, though Jimmy just nodded, having already been filled in.

Grian excused himself and went to retrieve it. The delivery man was sweet, required little conversation, and the exchange was over relatively quickly. The large package was moved inside. He did not, however, bring it back for Scar to see. Instead, he messaged Jimmy to join him, and waited to hear the padded steps coming down the hallway.

"That came pretty fast," Jimmy hummed. "It would've been *faster* and *cheaper* if you'd let me steal you one, but—"

“The measurements wouldn’t have been right,” Grian tutted, beginning to tear off the cardboard. “I bought this specially to fit taller folks. Knowing you and Scar, the two of you will get into enough trouble in the future that it’ll be plenty useful. Not to mention, when it comes to money, I’m frugal enough to afford to go crazy on occasion.”

“Whatever,” Jimmy grumbled. He knelt next to the box and took over for the vet. “I’ll put it together. You should go back to the room before he misses you too much.”

Grian scoffed, ignoring how the jab made him flush. “Alright, I’ll stall for you. Knock on the bedroom door when it’s ready.”

“Shouldn’t take long. Not much needs to be attached,” Jimmy told him, and Grian disappeared down the hall.

Scar was not, however, in the position that they’d left him. In fact, he was halfway off the bed, looking like he’d been caught in the middle of something highly illegal when the vet walked in. “Grian! I thought something happened — Jimmy left so abruptly.”

“No, it was nothing,” he told him. Grian paused and raised a brow at the way Scar’s legs were shaking from the force of staying upright. They wouldn’t do that if he hadn’t been actively pushing himself beyond the boundaries they’d practiced as of late. “Were you trying to make a run for it?”

“What? Oh, this? No, no, I was just… practicing those handy dandy exercises,” Scar lied, blinking too quickly. “Good to get those reps in, y’know? You can go back to helping Jimmy.”

“Scar, you know you’re not allowed to walk around unsupervised,” Grian scolded. “Sit down.”

Scar averted his gaze. “Well, I would, but Jellie’s over by the window, and I was going to go pet her—“

“Sit,” Grian repeated, narrowing his eyes. Scar sensed the danger in the word, lowering himself back to rest against the mattress. Although, he notably wasn’t sitting down completely. Rather, it looked like he still kept the majority of his weight on the ground, and simply leaned on the bed, waiting for his next opportunity to escape.

The vet sighed, long, slow, and irritated. He crossed the room in two large steps and put a hand on Scar’s shoulder, forcing him fully onto the bed. Wide green eyes met his own, pupils dilating as Grian leaned in. “You really don't have your listening ears on today, do you?”

Scar’s gaze darted to the hand that still held his shoulder. Grian watched his throat bob as he swallowed, and heard the shaky breath that came out around his words when he replied, “But I’m bored!”

Grian took his other shoulder and shook him lightly. Scar snorted out a laugh, trying and failing to bat him away. “You stress me out,” the vet grumbled. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s my only entertainment these days,” Scar mused, though he was half joking. “I love the way your eyebrows pinch together when you’re mad at me.”

The vet stopped shaking him just long enough to flick his forehead. He was not surprised to hear such a subtly depressing statement from his companion. Both of them were well aware that the injured man was greatly missing his former freedom. He’d been steadily recovering, but his small steps weren’t always satisfactory.

Some big moves *had* been made towards his independence. For example, he was consistently strong enough to hold his own dishes or cups, and he wasn't constantly trembling anymore. And, with some assistance in carrying him back and forth, Scar had been able to bathe himself in total privacy.

Still, that stuff wasn't always enough, and anyone could see that. Scar spent most of his days doing nothing aside from chatting with his caretakers, participating in physical therapy, watching videos on the laptop Lizzie had brought from his house, or reading from the collection of comics Jimmy had lent him.

If he wanted to deviate from that, he needed one or more people around to help move him to other rooms, and a person lingering vaguely nearby at all times to be sure he wasn't straining himself. Not able to work, or function without assistance was a major adjustment. Whether he was close with his caretakers or not, Grian was sure he would feel equally as suffocated and useless in Scar's position.

"Hang in there for a little longer," Grian told him, taking his hand and squeezing it. "I promise everything is about to get a lot better."

Scar frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

Right on time, a knock sounded. Grian approached, unable to bite back his smile. "There's a reason I was having you work on standing and sitting specifically."

He swung open the door to reveal Jimmy, and the brand new wheelchair that had just arrived. Grian watched as Scar realized what he was seeing, and his face lit up. Jimmy pushed it closer, and Scar carefully stood to inspect his gift. He ran a hand over the handles, the cushions, and released an amazed breath.

“You bought me a wheelchair?” His eyes jumped up to Grian, round and questioning. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

“That you can get out of bed and wheel around my entire apartment all on your own?” Grian nodded, stepping over to rest a hand on the chair. “It does.”

The immediate relief and joy that spilled out of Scar was like nothing else. His smile was breathtaking, blinding, beyond what should be possible for human expression. His eyes crinkled and overflowed with happiness. Witnessing his indescribable delight was like a split in the clouds after weeks of rain, sedation after months of pain, a fire in the middle of an icy tundra.

Grian was so caught up in the warmth that encapsulated his heart at the sight that he nearly missed it as Scar forced his legs forward. In one big movement, the vet was pulled into a bone-crushing hug. The warmth that had once just been within his chest spread rapidly outward, stoking embers into raging flames. He was completely surrounded by Scar.

“What? No hug for me? I’m the guy that put all this together,” Jimmy huffed from off to the side. “Sure, I didn’t pay for it or order it, but I helped him secretly get your measurements, and that should count for *something.”*

Instead of Jimmy’s statement winning him brownie points, Scar simply pulled back and stared in awe at Grian. “You based it on my measurements too?”

“Sorta? You’re pretty tall,” the vet hummed, shrugging. “It’s not actually custom, since those take ages to arrive, but I got the bigger

size, at least. I wanted you to fit as best as–”

He was yanked into another smothering hug. Although, distantly, he registered Jimmy also being tugged into this one as well. Jimmy grumbled about being a third-wheel, but his lanky arms wrapped around them.

“Okay,” Scar declared a minute later. “No more appreciation. I need to take this baby for a spin *yesterday.”*

Without any more fanfare, Scar plopped himself into the seat. He marveled at the way it fit, and the fact that his feet were not uncomfortable due to the customizations. Grian pointedly did not tell him the sheer amount that had been spent, and the collection of old medical school connections that had been contacted to get this exact model to arrive quite so quickly. It might’ve been enough to entice them into robbing another bank, so keeping it to himself was the best choice.

They spent the rest of the afternoon mutually teaching themselves how to navigate around the apartment with a wheelchair, none of the three having prior personal experience. It wasn’t perfectly accessible, as they’d eventually learned. The kitchen had a lip that was pretty annoying, but Scar was quick to invent a solution.

If he gave the wheels a decent amount of force, he could catch the entire chair with his powers and speed it up right before reaching the threshold, and was then able to make it over with absolutely no issue. He could also slow his descent when leaving to soften it if he so wished. Scar rolled back and forth through the doorway several times to perfect his entrance, puffing up with pride every time he succeeded.

Grian watched contentedly from the sidelines as Jimmy and Scar

chattered excitedly about all the cool tricks they could do if they utilized those same powers in the future. While nothing they discussed sounded remotely safe, their smiles were contagious, and it was impossible not to feel lighter just being around them.

Wholly pleased with his purchase, the vet dared to pull out his phone again. He had a few more ideas for ways to improve their situation, and he wasn't going to waste another moment.

With a new level of mobility came a new level of freedom and privacy for not only Scar, but Grian as well. Since his patient was no longer helplessly bound to the bed until his muscles recovered, there wasn't much need for Jimmy to hang around whenever they did their physical therapy, and they could go beyond the bedroom.

Currently, Grian's favorite place to set up the yoga mat was in the middle of the living room. They could open the windows to get a nice breeze, turn on the television for background noise, and spend quality time with Pearl and Maui simultaneously.

That was where they found themselves that afternoon. The vet had gotten back from an early morning shift at the clinic to discover that Lizzie and Scar were waiting for him in the kitchen, a freshly made plate of pancakes cooling on the counter.

They ate a late breakfast together, filling the room with a lovely melody of life. Unfortunately, Lizzie did have to leave shortly after to tend to Meri, and then it was back to the usual of just Scar and Grian.

Since they were both fairly relaxed and had clear schedules, the natural next step was to begin their daily exercises. Grian rolled out the yoga mat he'd bought not long ago, and Scar wheeled over to

scratch at Maui's little head while he waited. Once they were set up, and the vet had changed out of his scrubs, they carefully got Scar out of the chair and onto the ground. That particular part of the process was getting easier and easier as his companion grew stronger. These days, he hardly needed help to stand and walk a handful of steps.

"Sit down, please, keep your legs completely flat," Grian instructed. As always, he ran through a mental checklist of some basic stretches to get through first. Since Scar wasn't hurting in a specific area, researching physical therapy routines that would best benefit him had given mixed results. Grian had opted to prioritize his core, as that was near where the arrow had originally caused so much damage, but it probably wasn't what a professional would've done.

Scar was a good sport recently, though. Mostly because it wasn't just practicing standing or sitting again and again and again. The exercises, in his words, had begun to resemble genuine fitness routines, and were therefore something he was used to doing on his own anyway.

Grian supposed that made sense, given a professional villain would have to keep himself in consistently good shape. The comparisons made it easy enough to instruct Scar on what to do next. He knew what a plank was, knew where to put his feet and hands in certain complex poses, and knew when to tell if his posture wasn't quite correct by the way it was pulling on his muscles.

They started with basic warmups, which didn't really need any guidance from Grian at all. Scar touched his toes, stretched out his arms, folded one leg over the other and twisted, so on and so forth. They proceeded rather uneventfully into the next few stretches.

It was easy to zone out, both of them losing themselves in the routine. Only once they got into slightly more challenging exercises was focus returned.

“On your hands and knees please,” Grian told him, and Scar obliged. He was directed to keep his eyes down on the floor, extend his left arm out in front of him, tighten his abdominal muscles, and hold for several beats. Then, they switched to the right arm, and repeated the process with both his legs as well. He was a little shaky by the end, but not quite ready to tap out. Grian had him carefully extend one arm and one leg at the same time.

His posture, however, when doing this, was faltering a little. Grian hummed, and took it upon himself to lightly touch Scar’s upper arm, helping to lower it to the ideal angle. His companion’s skin was hot to the touch, sending a shiver up his spine from that amount of contact alone. It was made worse when Scar raised his head to shoot a grateful smile in the vet’s direction.

“Thanks, Doctor.”

Grian rolled his eyes at the way his stomach dared to flutter in response. He put a hand on the back of Scar’s neck and made him look down again.

“You have to keep your head level with your spine for this exercise,” he muttered. “We’re almost done with this one. Just behave for a few more minutes.”

Scar laughed, but complied all the same. They moved on to a couple other core exercises, as well as a few that would help his hips and joints, and didn’t encounter any other issues. Grian decided eventually to wrap it up, and opted to end on a few easier exercises. Scar was, by then, sporting a thin sheen of sweat and shaking slightly more. Grian instructed him up into a basic bridge, in which he’d only have to raise his hips off the floor and remain there for a little bit.

Unfortunately, Scar was losing energy quickly. His form wasn't the best, his back dipping and his hips dropping with each second that passed. Grian stepped in to assist not long into it. His hands found the small of Scar's back, urging him up into the proper position. Once he was there, the vet kept his hand in place as a stabilizer.

"There you go," Grian said quietly. From this angle, he was hovering a bit above the other man. He could see the pink flush to Scar's cheeks, and the way his eyes had widened the slightest bit. "Much better. Hold on a little longer for me."

They stayed there as the seconds ticked by until Grian was satisfied. He removed his hand, and immediately, Scar dropped down onto the mat. His chest rose and fell quickly, but there was an upward turn to his lips, so the vet knew he wasn't actually hurting.

"I say we stop here for now," Grian suggested, and Scar made a noise of acknowledgement. "You're doing so much better, dude. The side where the arrow cut you still tends to weaken faster, but I can tell you've made immense progress."

"I can feel it for sure," Scar chuckled. "Last week, if you'd asked me to do a bridge after everything else, I would've thought you were crazy."

"Yeah, your core is improving rapidly," Grian snorted, raising a hand and patting Scar's stomach. He stopped himself when he realized what he was doing, removing the offending appendage. The vet did not, for a single second, dwell on the fact that Scar's abdomen was remarkably firm. "Anyway, uh, do you need help getting back into your chair?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd actually prefer the couch, please!"

Grian assisted his companion in getting back up to a standing position.

It was a process they'd perfected long ago. One of Scar's legs dragged behind a bit as they walked, but the couch wasn't far enough for it to matter terribly. They both dropped down into it and sighed with relief, neither caring that their sides were brushing, or that Scar's arm hadn't moved from where it's fallen over Grian's shoulder.

Pearl and Maui jumped up to join them, one cat curling up beside each human. Scar glanced over at him, having already grabbed the remote from the side table. "Do you care what we watch?"

"I picked yesterday," Grian said, suppressing a yawn. The warmth of the contact, combined with the comfort of being in only a hoodie and sweatpants after a whole morning of scrubs was becoming a damning lullaby. "Your turn."

"You're just saying that because you're about to fall asleep." Scar huffed out a laugh, the rumble of his voice ricocheting through the confines of Grian's heart. The heart that was — as always while in Scar's presence — doing its best to beat just that littlest bit too fast. "I'll try to pick something sufficiently boring to make you drift off quickly, Doctor."

Grian let his head lean back into the cushion and, coincidentally, also Scar's arm. He grinned, fondness welling in his chest. "Put on that space movie you like. Y'know, the one from the posters in your room."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his companion's brows raised. "You remember the posters in my room?"

"Of course. I remember a lot from that visit." Grian looked at him, feeling his eyes growing heavier with each tick of the clock. Even through the haze on the brink of sleep, he couldn't help but admire the lovely lines of the other's face. "After all, that was the day I met Jellie for the first time."

Scar smile, large and incomprehensibly beautiful. “You’re right. That should practically make it a national holiday.”

Grian didn’t respond, already being whisked away by unconsciousness. He could’ve sworn, though, just barely, that he could hear Scar whisper one more thing.

“I remember that day too, but for a very different reason.” There was a gentle shifting, and Grian’s head landed on his shoulder. “Sleep well, G.”

While the majority of Scar’s life had gotten a lot easier with his increased energy and mobility, he wasn’t entirely free of the grasp of the poison. Night terrors and heart palpitations still, on occasion, plagued him.

Maybe it had something to do with the weather, or how much exercise they’d done the day prior, but Scar woke one evening with a terrible gasping noise. The heart monitor – something he wore only while sleeping as of late – screeched in time with his raging pulse. The vet jolted upright, body moving before his mind could catch up.

He found himself at Scar’s bedside, eyes scanning the machine and his patient respectively. The man was upright, gripping at his chest, and choking through sobs. His vitals showed this was a fit similar to the ones he used to have frequently. The solution, then, would also be similar.

Scar was bordering on hyperventilating with how he gasped for air. Grian leaned forward, putting himself in his companion’s line of sight.

He called out, going through his usual routine of attempting to communicate the start of a breathing exercise.

However, instead of receiving a nod of confirmation, or any other outward sign to affirm that Scar had heard him, the man just kept crying. His breathing didn't slow, eyes didn't gain clarity, and his body did not cease its tremoring. Grian tried to take his hand, but it was yanked away, curling into the bedsheets with a fury.

This fit bore a terrifying resemblance to those first few nights after the poison had entered his system – closer in nature to a panic attack than heart problems. He was clearly frightened of whatever visions his mind had dared to show him, and the combination of physical symptoms was doing nothing to ease that.

No matter what Grian said or did, he could not get through to Scar. His touch was obviously overstimulating, his words fell upon deaf ears, and his breathing exercises required the patient to have a semblance of control. Then, waiting it out was their last hope.

For several minutes, all the vet could do was watch his companion shuddering under the weight of his own inner horrors. Grian kept speaking, kept whispering comfort, kept attempting to reach him. He didn't know if he could be heard, or if Scar was entirely alone inside his head, but he tried anyway.

"I'm here," Grian promised. "I'm not going anywhere."

It took five minutes of terrible sobbing and gut-wrenching gasps of pain before the heart monitor started to slow. Even then, Grian didn't try to push him, or get his hopes up. Scar wasn't coming down from the panic. Whatever had prompted this still haunted him, if the whites of his eyes and part to his lips were any indication.

But there *was* a slight change.

Scar's gaze landed upon Grian, and he seemed to truly see him. The other was perspiring, fatigued, and there were trails of tears coating his cheeks. He began to blink rapidly, as though trying to keep his focus in one place.

"Hey, Scar," Grian said softly, doing his best to smile. "I'm here, just keep your eyes on me."

Carefully, so as not to startle him, the vet extended an open hand towards the other. Scar watched him, and at first, did not react. His knuckles were white from gripping at the fabric over his heart and the blanket over his lap. After a minute, his fingers shakily released their hold. Grian almost collapsed with relief when Scar finally allowed their hands to connect, finally allowed them to touch, finally allowed a connection between them.

"Thank you," Grian hummed. Progress made in one area meant more was possible in another. Scar's irregular breathing was the point of most concern. "How about we do those breathing exercises now, hm? The same one as always, alright?"

The other did not nod, nor did his expression move away from pained at all. Grian bit back a frown, trying to remain outwardly reassuring, even as his concern grew. Scar still wasn't hearing him. He almost always managed some response, however small, during other fits like this.

Grian did not give up, attempting instead to guide Scar towards alternative methods he'd researched to help calm people down, such as listing off objects around the room, or counting things on his

fingers.

None were useful while Scar was trapped in his head, though. He would've resolved to just wait the attack out, but his companion was clearly in a lot of pain. The longer this went on, the more agony he'd be in.

Sedatives were always an option. They had to be handled with care when someone was in emotional distress, but Grian was fairly sure a decrease in physical sensations would help ease the panic significantly.

"Scar," Grian said, standing from his seat and gently removing his fingers from where they'd intertwined with the other's own. "I'm going to get some medicine from the other room. I'll be right back."

He turned to leave, but there was a gasp from behind him, and then a hand was clamping down on his wrist.

"Don't go," Scar choked out, voice quivering as he spoke for the first time that evening. "Grian, *please."*

The vet stopped, staring down at him, seeing how distressed he'd become at the simple suggestion of the vet leaving. Guilt pooled in his gut, raw and heavy. There was no point in weighing his options, not when Scar was looking up at him with such fear. As much as Grian thought sedatives would help, the last thing he wanted to do was abandon the other man when he needed him.

He allowed a weak tug on his sleeve to pull him forward and down. The vet was immediately drawn into a tight embrace, the full force of Scar's anguish put into the arms he wrapped around Grian. The shaking man kept him close, fingers digging into the fabric of the vet's

shirt, and his face burying in the crook of Grian's neck.

Grian adjusted easily. He seated himself on the edge of the bed to allow for a better position, and hugged back. Scar released a slow breath as the mutual force from Grian's arms encased him too. The vet did not fail to notice that.

Pressure, he'd read sometime during one of his late-night internet scouring sessions, was another viable method for assisting with panic attacks. He hadn't considered it before, hesitant to break physical boundaries while Scar was too vulnerable to deny him. However, if something as easy as a hug could let out a bit of tension, Grian was more than happy to oblige.

"Don't go," Scar muttered into the vet's shoulder. "Stay here. Can't be alone."

"I won't go anywhere," Grian replied. To his surprise, though, his friend just tightened his grip impossibly more, as though he didn't believe the vet to be telling the truth. "I swear, Scar. I'll stay right here."

There was a small noise of acknowledgement from the other, and then silence descended upon them again. Grian honed in on the shallow, uneven rise and fall of Scar's chest, as well as the beeping of the heart monitor. The man in his arms shook frequently, with only brief moments of stillness here and there.

It was strange to feel all the sensations he knew plagued Scar from this close distance. Every expansion of his ribs pressed into Grian's chest too, and the frantic pace of his friend's pulse could be experienced in the palms of his hands – almost as if those things belonged to him as well.

An idea came to him within those stagnant moments. He shifted to ensure there was as little space between them as possible.

Grian took a deep breath in through his nose, and then exhaled lengthily through his mouth. He repeated the process, purposely holding Scar to him more firmly during these ministrations.

Inhale, exhale, again. Inhale, exhale, again. Inhale, exhale, again.

The moment he heard Scar's sniffling fade, and felt the welcome push of a chest against his, coming in time with his breaths, he could hardly contain his relief.

Though it took several minutes, the beeping of the heart monitor gradually slowed to a completely regular pace. There was only steady breathing occupying the room aside from it.

Grian spoke up once he was certain Scar was calmed, "Do you want to try laying down?"

"No." Scar shook his head weakly, squeezing the vet's torso. "I don't want… to let go."

"You don't have to," Grian replied, knowing the words to be true only once they'd left his mouth. "How about I stay next to you for the rest of tonight?"

Scar loosened his grip and pulled back enough to stare at Grian properly. "Really?"

His eyes were red and puffy, and his lips were chapped from too many frantic intakes of air. Grian wished he wouldn't look so sad anymore, wished he wouldn't experience this pain anymore, wished he would be well again. He would take care of Scar for as long as he needed, but to have a reaction this bad so many weeks later was heartbreaking.

"Really," Grian whispered. "I'll do anything to make you feel better."

Scar nodded, seemingly content. Grian asked him to make space, and their hug briefly collapsed. The other man shifted over in the bed, patting the mattress beside him. For the first time in weeks, Grian settled into his own bed. It was an unfamiliar sensation by that point, but he couldn't deny how nice it felt to have all of his joints cradled in a way no pile of cushions could ever hope to provide.

As soon as his head hit the pillow, there were arms snaking around his middle and pulling him in again. Scar was perpetually warm, radiating the kind of comfortable heat that Grian couldn't help but melt into.

He hugged back, immediately relieved with the solution they'd landed on being one that allowed both of them to rest. Scar's body shook with the occasional tremor, and his face was still pinched with the slightest amount of pain, but it definitely wasn't an unpleasant place to be for either involved. The other was already looking calmer.

Admittedly, there was an aspect to having another presence in his bed that was a little strange to the vet. Grian was so accustomed to a solitary lifestyle that this amount of constant contact was foreign to him — *new*. He marveled at his own ability to adjust so quickly, letting their legs tangle together and their heartbeats sync up. Though he'd always been someone to enjoy personal space, this was comfortable too. Grian could easily tell how Scar, in the midst of a

panic, might be calmed by this connection.

He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the other man's breathing as it grew slower and deeper. Grian might have, under alternative circumstances, been embarrassed to be this near to Scar. But he couldn't find it within himself to be flustered tonight, not when he was just helping in any way he could.

Maybe in the future, when they were both well and conscious, he might allow some semblance of hopeful yearning to slip through. Not now, though. Not now.

Grian didn't remember falling asleep, but at some point, he faded into an inky blackness. It was warm there, delightfully cozy. Throughout the whole of the evening, he didn't stir once. There were no urges to readjust his position, or throw aside his blanket. He was simply warm and comfortable and tired in the best way.

To have it interrupted by a light behind his eyelids was jarring and horrible. Morning was an unwelcome beast. Grian muttered out a curse as clarity began to creep into his mind, glaringly aware of the sun coming through the window. On instinct, he buried his face into the pillow nearest him.

There was a rumbling from beneath him, and it made him frown in his delirious half-sleep. His phone alarm wasn't *supposed* to be going off yet. There was no reason to be up so early when he was working a night shift that day. He just wanted to keep sleeping for a little while longer. It was the deepest he'd been able to get into unconsciousness in weeks, and no part of him was willing to give it up.

The rumbling ceased after a minute. Grian thought he might finally be left alone, but then a new sensation joined the symphony of pleasant buzzing around his body. He thought he felt something brush against

his face, dragging through his hair. It brought him out of the haze of the dreamworld, anchoring him more in reality.

With great effort, Grian blinked awake, only flinching a little at the way the sunlight hit his face. The first thing he noticed was the odd color of the pillow beneath him. It wasn't the plain white cover he usually put on his bed, and actually, now that he was looking more closely, it was an odd shape as well.

A hand ghosted over his back, sending a shiver up his spine. With that shock, the events of the previous night slammed into him.

Grian jerked his head up from where it'd been resting atop Scar's chest. His gaze landed on soft green eyes immediately, and his breath hitched. "Morning, G," Scar said, voice gravelly and deepened by the early hour. "How did you sleep?"

The vet opened his mouth, but couldn't form a single sentence. His friend seemed wholly amused by that, smiling wider and wider with each silent second that passed.

Grian couldn't tear his eyes away from Scar. A ray of morning light shone through the curtains and upon his radiant face. There was no evidence of the prior evening's upset in his expression. Any pain he might've been experiencing had passed, replaced with a calm sort of beauty instead.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" Scar tipped his head to the side. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Cat," Grian echoed, nothing but static between his ears.

He might have stayed there forever, just staring and letting his heart beat harder and harder until his ribs were broken. However, he received mercy from the universe in the form of a meow at the foot of the bed.

Jellie jumped up to investigate the commotion. She was definitely hungry, begging to be fed. It worked to restart his brain, distracting him from his purgatory of unfortunate attraction. Grian sat up, untangling himself from Scar's hold and swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"I have to feed the cats."

"Grian, wait," Scar said, catching the vet's wrist before he could make a break for the door. Grian chanced a look back at him, and could've melted from the sight of his face alone. Scar was outrageously handsome when he was wrought with mischief and smug glee. "You don't have to run away. I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your help last night."

"Um, yeah, yes," Grian choked out, embarrassingly quiet. "Always, man."

Scar shot him a final smile, and then released him. Grian hesitated for a moment, so it wouldn't seem like he was running away, escaping once that superficial timer was up. He hid in the kitchen until his pulse had calmed, and he wasn't lightheaded enough to pass out.

"Keep it together. Be professional," he whispered to himself. "This is *not* the time to lose your nerve."

Scar had long since graduated from the point of only being able to eat a handful of basic things. And this was, simply put, the worst thing that could've ever happened to Grian.

Because Grian *couldn't cook*.

It wasn't like he hadn't tried in the past, but he knew from experience that he was impressively bad at anything culinary. He'd made it through med school with frozen meals or takeout, and that had carried for a long while into adulthood. Obviously, he could deal with normal things, like pasta or sandwiches, but anything with more than a couple of clear instructions was beyond him.

For a while, he hadn't really worried about that fact. It was just that no one had ever taught him how to plan ahead while at the grocery store, nor how to begin looking for appealing recipes. And while that might've put him at a fundamental disadvantage to his peers, it wasn't like he really had company around before the Bamboozlers came into his life.

Now, though, there was a genuine risk of this secret being revealed to people whose opinions mattered to him greatly.

For weeks, the vet had been flying by the seat of his pants. Miraculously, thanks to some higher power, and helpful maneuvering on his part when it came to scheduling Lizzie and Jimmy's help, he'd been able to avoid being in charge of most meals. On the off chance he was responsible, he always kept frozen food or something easy like pasta around to hide behind.

But his luck had expired.

After so long, Scar had taken notice of their simplistic meals. It was a

regular comment that had brought this to Grian's attention, nothing pointed or rude, just a voiced observation.

"Y'know what I miss from before I was sick?" Scar had leaned back in his wheelchair one afternoon as a pizza was pulled from the oven. "Home-cooked meals. We don't really do that here, which I get, but *man,* I would die for something with a lot of flavor right now."

Scar had gone on to eat the pizza with no problem, but the comment lingered in the air around them. Grian couldn't get away with these half-hearted preparations anymore. Finally, he was forced to try.

Grian squinted at the recipe book he'd bought on a whim on his way home from work. He'd gone shopping shortly after acquiring the text, throwing just about every ingredient he could find into his cart, whether he understood how to use them or not. It was expensive, but he rarely went on benders like these, so it was necessary.

Now, the crock pot sat in front of him, filled with an assortment of vegetables, mostly garlic, broth, spices, an unnatural amount of butter, and so forth. He was stuck specifically on a section of the book that was asking him to add the chicken breasts – which created a little problem for him.

"Something wrong, G?"

Grian startled, glancing over his shoulder. Scar sat at the kitchen table, legs kicking back and forth and a smile on his face. His forearm crutch rested against the side of the table, leftover from when he'd been practicing to use it. While most of the time, he was too tired and preferred his wheelchair, they'd bought the crutch to help him readjust to walking again.

“No, everything is totally fine,” Grian lied. As discreetly as possible, he pulled out his phone, googling how long it took for frozen chicken breasts to thaw. The answer being nine hours was *not* a result he enjoyed reading, so he put his phone down and racked his brain for alternative solutions.

The crock pot offered a variety of settings, one of which being high heat. It was viable that using that specific option would counteract the fact that the chicken was still cold. Maybe it was easier to do it as the book recommended, but that would probably work just as well.

Grian went ahead with it, unwrapping the chicken and following the rest of the recipe’s instructions. He added spices, laid out the breasts as requested, and then closed the lid. The crock pot setting was switched to high, and he stepped back. In a little over an hour, they would have a delicious dinner.

“Grian,” Scar started, an interesting edge to his tone. The vet hummed in acknowledgement, not confident enough to look him in the eye yet. “Can you bring me that recipe book?”

Grian winced.

Ah, that *couldn’t* be good.

Slowly, as if moving at a reserved pace might hide whatever he’d just done to put that strange passiveness into Scar’s voice, Grian did as he was told. The book was picked up, and he turned to face the other.

In doing so, he discovered that he was correct to be worried about seeing his companion’s expression. Scar’s face was carefully neutral, the kind of thing a teacher might wear before discussing a bad test grade. As soon as the instructions were given to his friend, an

overwhelming shame ran through him.

“Grian,” Scar said, eyes downturned. “I see you put that pot on high heat.”

“I did,” Grian replied gingerly.

“This recipe calls for low heat,” Scar said. He glanced up, green eyes so blank that it raised the hair on the back of the vet’s neck. “Is there a reason you’ve done that?”

Grian didn’t answer, looking away. It was beyond terrifying to be under such subtle scrutiny when he was so utterly clueless to his own shortcomings. He did, however, return his gaze to the other man when he heard the scraping of a chair being pushed back. Scar was standing, donning his crutch, and walking himself over to the crock pot.

“Careful, Scar,” the vet hissed, rushing to his side. “Don’t strain yourself.”

“I’m fine, G,” Scar assured him, giving a halfhearted pat to his shoulder. He had gotten much better at using this particular mobility aid as of late, but he could still be shaky when standing for long periods of time. “I’m not sure the chicken will be if I leave you to your own devices.”

Grian watched him approach the crock pot, hand extended out to switch it to low heat. However, once his eyes landed on something past the glass top, Scar paused. Grian frowned as he moved and turned the pot off entirely. “What? What is it?”

Scar's disappointment traveled along the countertop, where the extra ingredients were waiting to be packed away. Specifically, the remainder of the frozen chicken.

"Grian?"

Grian flinched. "Yes?"

"You didn't thaw this chicken out properly, did you?" Grian's shoulder's dropped, which was enough of an answer for Scar. He moved on to the next topic, "And you didn't brown it ahead of time either, did you?"

"Brown the chicken–? Why would I–?" Grian's frown deepened further, brows creasing. "Where does the recipe say to do that?"

Scar pointed to a section in the book. It was slightly off to the side in a little yellow box. Grian tilted his head.

"I thought that was optional," he admitted. "Is it not?"

Scar snorted, and his pointing shifted to a small text up in the corner of the yellow box. Grian had missed it the first time, but now that he was looking, he could read the words, *'First Step,'* printed fairly clearly.

His jaw dropped. Small print or not, he couldn't believe he'd missed that. Shame crept up his spine.

“So, allow me to summarize this as simply as I can,” Scar said. “You seasoned frozen chicken, put it directly in the crock pot, and then turned it up to high heat, expecting that to fix your problem?”

The vet flushed, agape. “Well, when you put it *that* way…”

Scar laughed – a loud, boisterous noise, overflowing with the most genuine amusement Grian had ever heard. He held his gut, bending at the waist from the force of the cackling. Grian’s cheeks were so hot that he feared his head might catch on fire.

“I’m sorry,” Scar gasped between punched-out wheezes. His smile was contagious, even as Grian wanted nothing more than to crawl into a hole and die. Scar calmed, though it took several mortifying minutes. Finally, he was able to straighten and say, “Here, let me fix it. The crock pot might be a lost cause, but I can still make something edible with the leftovers.”

“You’re going to cook?” Grian tried to disguise the shaking of his voice by clearing his throat. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Won’t you get tired of standing?”

“If I get tired of standing, then I’ll make you get my chair. No way am I leaving this unattended again,” Scar said, tossing him a cheeky grin. “Anyway, I’m much stronger now, so don’t worry a hair on your pretty head, Doctor. Everything will be fine.”

Grian had no response to that. All he could do was step aside and watch as his companion began the process of shifting the remains of his mess into a masterpiece.

Scar grabbed a ziplock bag, as well as a large bowl, then placed the last two remaining chicken breasts into said bag. The bowl containing

the bag was put under the running tap of the sink with cold water, and left to defrost for roughly thirty minutes.

In the meantime, he set a pot of water on the stove to boil while explaining thoroughly to Grian why his method of cooking wouldn't have worked. It seemed important to him that the vet not repeat this mistake, lest he create a monstrosity of a meal in the future and give himself food poisoning.

Grian accepted the advice graciously, figuring Scar had more than enough experience with poisonings of any kind to be quite knowledgeable.

Once the meat was done thawing – apparently, it had already been most of the way there, as Scar explained, just needing the little extra push the cold water gave it – he began the preparation. From what Grian could make out, the chicken was doused in flour and a variety of seasonings.

After each piece was thoroughly covered, Scar brought out a large skillet that Grian had only used maybe once or twice in the past. He heated oil and butter for a little bit, then added the breasts into the mixture a moment later. Scar cooked them until they were a delicious color, and moved them onto a plate.

He wasn't done, although he did pause to grab some spaghetti from a nearby cabinet to pour into the pot of now-boiling water he still had going. Scar made Grian put a short timer on his phone, and then shifted to the next step with his main dish.

Scar moved faster with the chicken out of the way, adding an assortment of things to the skillet like cream, cheese, more spices, and a couple of herbs. After a bit, he put the meat back into the equation too.

He used a spoon to pour the freshly-made sauce over top, and continued to let it cook. In the extra span of time, he asked Grian to help him pour the pasta out into a strainer, since he only had one hand available. They did so, and he entrusted the job of shaking out the water to the vet.

A handful of minutes passed before Scar considered the chicken finished. He prepared two portions of spaghetti, then he transferred the chicken over to rest atop each plate. The creamy sauce smelled wonderful, enough to cause Grian's mouth to water from the proximity alone. The dish was garnished with basil and parmesan, and declared done.

"Wow, Scar," Grian marveled. He got utensils and carried both portions over to the table to allow his friend as few obstacles as possible, placing them down at their respective spots. "You've really outdone yourself."

"I should thank your book for making you buy all the right ingredients," Scar chuckled as he sat. Grian fetched the two of them each a glass of water, then settled as well. "This is one of my go-to recipes whenever I have the chance to make it."

Grian was about to dig in, but Scar stopped him with an outstretched hand.

"Wait a minute! This dinner is missing something." He removed his phone from his pocket and began to swipe through until he found what he wanted. The device was placed directly in the middle of the table with the volume all the way up, and a moment later, classical music began to filter through its speakers. "No fancy meal is complete without some ambiance. You may now eat."

“The chef knows best,” Grian laughed as he cut up the chicken. A second later, he raised his fork to his mouth and took a bite.

His eyes went wide immediately, tastebuds exploding as they encountered the most magnificent home-cooked meals that had ever existed. Distant violins combined with a much bigger orchestra, crashing together like a grand combination of heaven and earth. A wonderful mixture of cheese, garlic, and shocking flavor overcame him.

He dropped his fork, grabbing the other’s hand. “This is brilliant, Scar,” he practically shouted. “I can’t believe it. You said you made this dish often? What’s it called?”

“Marry Me Chicken.”

Grian blinked, mouth clicking shut. “Pardon?”

“It’s called Marry Me Chicken,” Scar repeated, head propped in his palm. “An interesting name, I know, but it’s very popular.”

“Oh, right,” Grian whispered. He released Scar’s hand, ears burning at the misconception, and forced all of his focus to return to the wonderful meal in front of him. A symphony of flutes started up while the brass section entered a brief repose. “Thank you, Scar, and sorry for making you work while you’re under the weather. I’d have killed us both if you didn’t step in.”

Scar laughed, taking a bite himself. “Honestly,” he started once he’d swallowed. “I’m glad you’re bad at cooking.”

“What?” Grian frowned, offense blooming in his heart. “Why?”

“You were too perfect before, Doctor,” Scar told him, eyes crinkling as he smiled. “I’m always such a disaster in front of you. It’s nice to turn things around for once.”

Grian huffed, feigning nonchalance, even though that expression on his friend’s face was actively causing the opposite response.

Although, genuinely, Scar was a little delusional if he believed the vet hadn’t screwed up until this point. When Grian pictured himself around the other man, it was always as a bumbling fool, constantly tripping over his words and causing problems for the both of them. Perhaps the only area in which he could make up for that was his medicinal knowledge.

“I suppose you’re right,” Grian muttered. “I am nowhere near as skilled as you are. No dinner I prepare for you in the future will ever live up to this”

“That’s alright. It takes practice,” Scar said. He paused, lighting up a bit. It was his turn to reach across the table and grab Grian’s hand. “Hey, what if we strike up a deal?”

“A deal?”

“Yeah,” Scar replied, nodding with vigorous excitement. “Since you don’t like to cook, and I’m always sitting here bored to death, why don’t we have a little mutual exchange? You’ll buy me any ingredients I need, and I’ll make us some amazing meals every day. How does that sound?”

Grian straightened, eyes widening. “Wait, really? You’d be willing to do that?”

“Of course!”

The vet considered him for a minute, apprehension growing. “I don’t know. I couldn’t ask you to do anything draining while you’re still–”

“The other option is I kidnap a chef from a nearby restaurant and keep them locked in your kitchen,” Scar threatened, eyes glinting in a way that implied he was serious. Grian sucked in a breath, suddenly terrified for someone else’s life.

“I look forward to our deal,” he croaked, and Scar returned to his usual chipper self.

Grian distracted himself by continuing to eat, choosing to bask in the glory of such a brilliant dish instead of the rest of their conversation. He figured that, if everything was as good as this, he would have no problem adjusting to Scar’s proposed routine. No problem at all.

It was over almost too quickly. Scar’s delicious meal with an embarrassing name was something the vet was certain he could eat over and over again without ever getting sick of it. Combined with such lovely music, and even lovelier company, Grian was willing to forget the rest of the world in favor of remaining at that table forever.

It was, however, Scar that interrupted the illusion of eternity before it was allowed to truly begin. He stood from the table, pushing back his chair and stepping to the side. Grian raised a brow at the way he did not reach for his crutch, seeming content to just stand there, staring down at the vet. “Do you need something?”

Scar didn't speak. Instead, he extended a hand outward, palm up and waiting. Grian, confused, gingerly set his own hand atop it. He yelped, surprised, as he was yanked out of his seat suddenly and pulled towards his companion.

Despite initiating it, the force of the movement had the adverse effect of throwing off Scar's already-unstable balance. Grian had to jerk quickly to grab the other's wrist to prevent him from toppling backwards. They tumbled into an awkward, hovering limbo in which both clung on to one another, gasping for breath. Scar's expression was the exact opposite of Grian's quiet shock, a grin splitting his features and casting rays of light through the room.

"Sorry," Scar laughed, straightening himself and standing at his full height so that Grian was the one looking up at him instead. They were close, chests nearly touching, but the vet's feet were glued to the floor and his companion didn't seem to notice the proximity. "I was trying to be more graceful than that."

"Obviously," Grian replied, though it came out quieter than he'd intended. He released his grip on the other in an attempt to regain some of his lost control. "And what exactly were you going to do with all that grace?"

While he did not respond with words, Scar's smile sharpened. It reminded Grian vaguely of the moment right before danger, the breath before an accompanied threat, the cold before a knife pressed against skin. He felt a shiver of anticipation start in his bones. That sensation was only accentuated when a touch ghosted along the base of his spine.

A palm rested there, confident and scorching. Grian's whole focus was on the feeling, gaze locked on Scar's face, enough to almost miss the brush of fingers intertwining with his own. It was, all at once,

reminiscent of a night long ago, upon a moonlit porch. Scar's hand in his, the other pulling him in, Grian's chin tipping up, and then a kiss meeting them in the middle.

However, tonight, it was not the anticipation of a kiss that sparked in the air around them. Rather, it was the hushing crescendo of music cascading down and around. A melody, smooth and sweet, that overflowed with enchanting resonance. It swelled in time with the beat of their hearts, growing stronger by the minute.

"A fancy meal with fancy music deserves to be followed by some fancy dancing," Scar said, grinning from ear to ear. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Grian sucked in a breath. A beat passed in silence aside from the music. Though, in all honesty, he couldn't imagine why he allowed it to. He knew his answer from the moment Scar had posed the question, no matter how spontaneous and absurd the request. It was the same answer as he would give Scar time and time again to any question.

"Yes," he whispered. "I absolutely would."

When Scar stepped back, Grian found himself stepping closer in turn. It picked up fast from there. They moved in tandem with the music, slowing as it softened, and quickening as it crested. Neither of them were good dancers. Their movements were clumsy, dipping to the left and spinning around each other back to the right, not caring if they bumped against the countertops or kitchen table.

Even though Scar's feet stuttered on occasion, and Grian's lungs could never remain full enough with air, they stepped until their soles were sore, turned until they were too dizzy to see, smiled until their cheeks stung with sheer bliss.

The music reached its zenith, stars aligning with the crashing of cymbals, the roaring of horns, the whistling of pipes, and the thrill of the piano. It hit this overwhelming peak at the same moment as Grian was spun one final time, and pulled back into a familiar chest. The concluding cacophony rang out, brilliant and bold, and he felt himself dip.

Then, there was silence, only their panting breaths and fading laughter without the guise of music to hide behind. Much like their dinner, beautiful as the moment was, Grian would've stayed forever had it not been for Scar breaking first.

The dip ended, allowing the vet back on his own two feet. It couldn't have lasted longer, given the intense way Scar had started to shake from the exertion. They didn't release each other, too certain they'd both collapse if they tried, but they were no longer entangled within a single bubble of space.

Scar gestured silently towards his crutch, and Grian was quick to pass it over. Once he was able to lean the majority of his weight on that aid, they had no reason to continue clinging on. Still, Grian's hand waited in Scar's, and his thumb had begun to trace inadvertent circles into his knuckles.

"Someone has a lot more energy these days," Grian mused, unable to bite back the pure adoration lining his tone. "You've been holding out on me."

Scar mirrored his smile. "Maybe a little. If I promise *not* to hold out anymore, will you dance with me again?"

"Now?" Grian raised a skeptical brow, eying the other's tired posture.

Scar laughed, shaking his head.

"No, of course not now," he replied. "Just *again.* In the future. Whether it be as a reward for my wonderful cooking, or for no reason at all."

Subconsciously, Grian swayed the slightest bit closer, heart full. "Well, I suppose that could be arranged. I certainly don't *mind* being on even footing with you again."

"Perfect," Scar hummed. "Although, I do have one more favor to ask of you, if that's alright?"

"Yeah," Grian said, completely captivated. "Anything."

"Could you grab a chair for me?" Scar's smile, once reverent and sweet, became strained in a single moment. "I think I'm going to fall over."

Grian straightened, spinning and snatching a seat from the kitchen table. He positioned it behind Scar, and the man collapsed into it. The vet took it upon himself to fetch Scar's wheelchair from the other room. When he returned, his companion looked like he was a few minutes away from falling asleep right at the table.

With full stomachs and a healthy amount of exercise under their belts, it didn't take a genius to figure out that the two of them were well beyond tired. "Come on," Grian chuckled. "I think we should retire a little early tonight."

The other agreed, and they returned to the bedroom – Scar to his bed,

and Grian to his pile of cushions. Aside from a sleepy exchange of pleasantries, nothing more was said between them. Nights were silent as of late, after they'd finally deemed the heart monitor of little use any longer.

Instead of incessant beeping, something new permeated the air around them as they drifted off into mutual sleep. Something exciting, something ripe, something ready to blossom into more. It was impossible to deny those feelings any longer.

The distance that had once been upheld by fragile professional standards had fallen away completely. Scar was better. Grian was out of excuses.

Now, it was only a matter of time.

The apartment was quiet.

Dusk was busily making a home in the sky beyond the windows. The smell of warm spices permeated the air of the kitchen and surrounding rooms after a lovely meal of steak had been eaten not long before. Two souls occupied the space during that serene hour, both of them satiated and winding down from a long day of individual activities.

There weren't as many visitors as of late, with Scar having healed past the point of requiring constant supervision. Lizzie and Jimmy still stopped by when they could, but it was more just to see their friend than it was due to any particular reason. A grand majority of the time, Grian and Scar were each other's only companions.

They'd become used to a life in mutual orbit, to the point where neither really considered the idea of bringing that to an end. It existed, of course, in a perpetual stasis of possibility, floating around them like debris through a planet's atmosphere – unwanted, but inevitable. They each knew, each acknowledged, each feared the day that they were forced to remember that only one man was supposed to permanently reside in that apartment, and the other had improved to the point of total independence.

This particular evening was different. Scar was dwelling on something. It offset the air, stole the last rays of sunlight, burned itself into the silence.

Grian paused scrolling through his phone when he noticed the other man had gone oddly still. When he looked up from the screen, he saw Scar propped on the bed, where he had been reading one of his comics until a moment ago. His gaze was focused down in his lap, and he was thumbing at the fabric of the sheets absently. His typical expression of content neutrality wasn't on his face anymore, having been replaced with something unexpectedly reserved.

The vet sat forward in his chair, concerned about the sudden change in their otherwise lovely atmosphere. "Scar? Is something on your mind?"

Scar didn't meet his eyes, obviously feeling hesitant. After a minute, he sighed, long and heavy.

"It'll be time for me to go home soon," he said, startling Grian with his blunt approach. "I'm almost completely better. I could probably take care of myself alone and be fine, right?"

A pit opened in the vet's stomach, cold and dark and lonely, from that one comment alone. It was fascinating, on a purely scientific level,

how just a few words could cause someone to be immediately subsumed with raw, unadulterated terror. It was more fascinating how Grian, a man who'd previously considered himself withdrawn, guarded, logical, was not the exception.

Static filled his mind in place of thoughts. The anxiety that gripped Grian's heart, the fear that he'd done something wrong to cause the introduction of this topic, was like a gale force wind against his ribcage. All he could do was stare at Scar's face, marvel at how his expression had twisted up, yet still remained unreadable.

After so long of cohabiting, taking care of one another's cats, making dinner, eating meals, falling asleep in the same room together, Scar was suggesting that he go *home*.

The statement was sudden, unexpected, carrying with it no build up or way to anticipate its arrival. Instead, it dragged along only the most unpleasant of questions. Though he'd been better for a while, why was Scar now finally introducing this topic? What had Grian done to spark these thoughts in his head? Was Scar unhappy? Uncomfortable? Bored?

A logical part of Grian knew, deep down, that this made sense. He didn't want to listen, didn't want to bother with reality, but he knew.

It was only natural that a man ripped so suddenly from his daily life would get homesick eventually. This was bound to happen, and avoiding the question didn't make it any less pronounced. Grian had been aware from the moment he'd patched Scar up on his couch that, one day, their little domestic haze would come to an end. He existed in this man's life to help him heal and send him on his way. Just because Scar had lingered a little longer than usual didn't mean he owed Grian a deviation from that overarching norm.

But none of that stopped the vet from wondering *why*.

Grian stared at Scar for several seconds in utter disbelief. He watched the man's breathing quicken, watched him shrink in on himself, watched all life leave his eyes.

Some of his confusion dimmed. He let the original comment replay in his head, gave more thought to the tone, the mood in the room, and the lengths his companion was taking to keep his expression unreadable. Grian saw, then, the layer underneath for what it truly was. He sensed the apprehension rolling off his friend in waves, and the anxiety filling the room alongside it.

The vet's shoulders dropped, countenance relaxing. He took a deep breath, in and out, calming himself before even beginning to consider a response.

"You could, probably. If you wanted to go, it'd be safe enough at this stage," Grian said, letting that hover in the air between them. When he spoke again, it was careful, measured, purposeful. "But, y'know, I don't really *want* you to leave."

Scar straightened, looking at him then. "You don't?"

Grian didn't understand how he could say it like it was the most unbelievable thing ever. Scar was the only light in his world these days, like the sun had condensed itself into a human shape. Coming home to freshly cooked meals, laughing over the dinner table, hearing another person's breathing as he fell asleep — Grian wouldn't trade that for anything. What was once endlessly lonely was now *alive,* brimming with character.

"No, I don't," he said again, firmer this time. "I like having you here."

“But,” Scar stammered, paralyzed with shock. “But you sleep on cushions, and you’re constantly taking care of me, and you never get any time to yourself–”

“I’m okay with that,” Grian told him. “It’s really not any trouble.”

The vet bit the inside of his cheek to keep from admitting more.

He *could’ve* said that for every downside Scar named, he had a hundred more benefits lined up. He could’ve said that returning home to Scar was all he thought about at work these days. He could’ve said that he’d begun to imagine a world in which the two of them did this without any injuries involved — just casually, for the sake of being together.

He could’ve said *more* than just those truths too.

He could’ve said that he wished they could share a kiss again, but this time, without the hidden meanings and false pretenses. He could’ve said that he wanted to kiss him over morning coffee, before bed, as he left for work, first thing when he got home, whenever the opportunity presented itself. That he wanted to help Scar relax after intense missions, bandage his wounds up and not watch him leave once he was done.

More than anything at all, Grian could’ve told Scar exactly how much he wanted *him*.

But he didn’t.

Instead, Grian set aside his phone, leaned forward, and rested his head on the mattress in front of him. He kept his face down to hide the helpless longing that had undoubtedly overtaken him. Grian asked without thinking, “What are you reading about?”

“Hm?” Scar seemed caught off guard, but he cleared his throat and easily went with the flow of the topic change. “Oh, uh, it’s a story about a superhero, actually. He’s constantly overlooked by his team, so he becomes a villain. It’s cheesy, but I like—“

“Read it to me.”

Scar stopped, croaking out a small, “What?”

Grian lifted his head just long enough to gesture to the comic. “Read me some of it. Please? You don’t have to start from the beginning. I’m just bored.”

Scar considered him for a second, but seeing no ulterior motive hiding in his eyes, picked up his comic, and started to read.

The vet folded his arms in front of him, and rested his forehead on them. It was a more comfortable position, made better once the low sensation of Scar’s voice washed over the room. He narrated for Grian, describing some of the important panels and then going through the dialogue, beginning in the middle of a fight scene. It might’ve been intense to anyone who knew the characters involved, but for Grian, it was simply about the man speaking.

His heart beat in tandem with every flipping page, every spinning sentence, spiking whenever Scar had to stop and sound out a word that was giving him trouble. The pace was slower than Grian would’ve read it, but he didn’t mind. The longer Scar took, the longer he’d be

able to hear that voice, be in his presence, distract the man from his delusions of leaving.

Several minutes passed that way, Grian listening to the lovely narration, and Scar falling into a melodic rhythm. It was impossible not to sink with the atmosphere, relaxation forming itself into a weight over Grian's eyelids, urging them to shut.

He went willingly into the shallow waters of almost-sleep, floating on the edge of total unconsciousness. Grian might've tipped over, might've lost himself completely in the rushing calm, but he stirred when Scar's reading stopped. He waited for the gentle lullaby to continue, but seconds turned into minutes, and it did not.

"Grian?"

Grian wasn't quite awake enough to react to his name, but with an aching slowness, he worked to pull himself together. He wanted to give Scar his full attention, even if rest was so tempting. His head turned in a gradual dragging motion, until his cheek was resting against his arm, and he was facing the direction of his companion's voice.

"Oh, you're asleep," Scar whispered. "You'll get a neck ache if you stay like that."

His hand ghosted along Grian's shoulder, as if he were about to give him a gentle shake. The vet waited for it, waited to receive that last little push he needed to fully rise. Except it never came. Scar stopped short, not quite following through.

"I hope you were telling the truth," Scar said, voice low, quiet, almost sad. "I hope you like having me here as much as I like being here."

There was a shuffling, as if he were sitting forward a bit in bed.

“I think I’d get poisoned a million more times if it meant being with you like this forever.”

Warmth surrounded him, and lips pressed against his forehead. The kiss was fleeting, fast, and Scar pulled back far too soon.

Grian’s heart jumped into his throat. It startled him awake, adrenaline shooting through his veins. His eyes opened, and he jerked upright. Through the blurry fog of recent sleep, his gaze landed on Scar’s face. A shocked expression came into focus, a wild blush creeping over his companion’s cheeks.

“Grian,” Scar choked out. “You’re–! I thought you were *asleep.”*

“I was,” Grian rushed, breathless. “But then you–!”

“It was an accident,” Scar blurted, throwing his comic onto the bedside table. All at once, he was overtaken by a landslide of words, each of them tumbling off his tongue with an impressive lack of thought. “You see, I just slipped, and my lips happened to land there. I didn’t kiss you solely because you look really handsome when you’re relaxed or anything! That would be ridiculous. Don’t you think that would be ridiculous? I certainly do–”

“You–?” Grian interrupted, eyes widening. Heat raced up his spine and into his face. “You think I’m handsome?”

Scar realized what he'd said, and waved his arms rapidly. His complexion had grown so rosy that he rivaled the deepest reds of dawn, or the brightest tendrils of a raging fire. It was beautiful, destructive, and unrestrained. Grian couldn't look away.

"No, no, that's not what I meant to say," he insisted. "Really, you have to believe me! It was meant to be something totally normal between friends, nothing else that you need to look into or give a second thought or hate me for doing."

Grian couldn't help but notice the way his eyes darted, his ears burned, and his fidgeting returned more adamantly as soon as his hands dropped. Combined with the nonsense spewing from his mouth, there was only one conclusion to be drawn. One irresistible, long-awaited conclusion.

He drew in a sharp breath, awestruck.

"Scar," Grian whispered. "You're *lying* to me."

Scar's mouth clamped shut, his brows furrowed, and his expression morphed into one of complete and utter terror.

Grian was *correct.*

The vet stood up, pushing the chair back in a single movement. He stepped closer to the bed, one arm holding him up as he leaned closer to Scar. Grian wanted – *needed* – to see his expression up close, needed to take in the full extent of the realization, needed to understand in every way he possibly could.

Still overcome with fear at how immediately his inner workings had been brought into the light, Scar shuffled back. He did his best to put space between them, but the headboard of the bed stopped him. There was nowhere else for him to run, no more excuses left to spew, nothing but his soul remaining on display for the whole world to see.

The vet paused only once they were inches apart, lips parted in wonder. Scar couldn't look away from him, frozen and clearly beyond embarrassed. Grian did not miss the way his companion's eyes deviated for just a moment, dipping further down his face. It was an action he'd seen Scar do over and over again, an action he'd written off every time as coincidence, a trick of the light, a misunderstanding.

Scar was doing it now, just as he'd done all those nights ago – whenever they were close, whenever there was tension, even the instant right before he'd leaned down and caught Grian's lips with his own. Despite his fear due to his own slip up, despite the uncertainty in the air, despite the sudden nature of the whole thing, Scar was thinking about *kissing* him.

Again.

"Lying? No, I'd *never* lie to you, G," Scar said, so soft that he was nearly inaudible. "Why would you think something like that?"

Grian watched his throat bob with an almost academic concentration, combined together with a new, unfathomable hunger to create a sensation unlike anything the vet had ever experienced before. He knew what it was, though, even with his shortcomings. This was raw, unfiltered *longing* for another person. For *Scar*.

"You *are* lying," Grian heard himself say, mind rushing to take in every single second of the world around him. He noted the warmth created by their nearness, the feeling of Scar's shaky breaths as they

fanned across his face, the mattress under his hand that supported the whole of his weight. “Don’t try to hide it. I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

Scar blinked rapidly, shifting his position for the hundredth time. He couldn’t seem to stop his gaze from darting down and back up several times over. “You, uh… You do?”

Grian hummed in quiet confirmation. He raised his free hand, pressing his palm firmly into the space between Scar’s ribs, stilling his movements. Green eyes went wide, pupils dilating enough to make them look almost completely black. His pulse was rapid and forceful, as though his heart were trying to break free of his chest.

“I always know when you’re lying,” Grian mused, a smile rising to his face, impossible to contain. “Like right now, and that night on the porch.”

Scar’s breath hitched. “On the porch?”

“You lied to me then, Scar,” he said, tapping his finger against the other’s chest in time with the racing beat within. “It wasn’t for show at all, was it?”

Scar was frozen, attention trapped on Grian as his palm slid upwards to cup his cheek. His skin was hot to the touch, exactly as warm as it looked.

“You just wanted to kiss me,” Grian stated. “Didn’t you?”

The world went entirely still. Outside, there was no whistling of the

wind, no rustling of leaves, no passing of cars. Inside, there were only the two of them. Two heartbeats, two rushing minds, two waiting bodies, each close enough to be confused for one.

Something in Scar changed. Perhaps he saw a flicker of his own feelings echoed in Grian's expression, or his nerves finally settled long enough for him to realize the static in the air. He seemed to soften, seemed to drop his guard, seemed to lose his fear. Scar was, in that interlude between one breath and the next, every bit the headstrong, charismatic, charming man that Grian had come to adore.

"I did," Scar whispered, not a single semblance of deceit left on his tongue. "How could I not when you were looking at me like–!"

He stopped.

Grian tilted his head to one side, bringing them just that damning bit closer. "Like what?"

"Like you are right now," Scar admitted, starstruck. His amazement danced across his face, widening into a smile that rivaled the moon, the sun, the dawn, the day, the universe itself and all the glorious atoms that made it up.

"Really?" Grian's own smile was audible. His whole body burned. "How do I look at you?"

The response came with a rolling of alluring eyes and the slight tip of Scar's head as he leaned further into the palm of Grian's hand.

"Like I don't scare you, like you've never seen anyone else as

ridiculous as I am, like you never want to look away," Scar went on, a little huff of wondrous laughter leaving him. His hand settled on Grian's waist. "Like you might be thinking of kissing me too."

The vet raised a brow. "And is that what you want?"

"More than anything," Scar said. Their noses brushed. "More than you could ever know."

"Today's your lucky day, then," Grian replied, only a breath away. "Because that's exactly what I plan to do."

Grian surged forward all at once, crashing their lips together. Scar kissed back instantly. Heat consumed them like a flame to kindling. Sparks roared through their veins, enveloping them in a flurry of sensations. They moved together in a desperate dance, passion and yearning and ages of waiting coming to a close in one kiss.

It was months in the making, deeper, richer, lovelier than their first kiss. It was a push and pull of pure devotion, a dizzying combination of every emotion that had ever crossed their minds. It was the infusion of their souls as they finally, *finally* reached that same, beautiful conclusion.

Maybe a little while ago, the chemistry between them could've been summarized as a simplistic want, a pining, a crush. But they were past that now. Grian had nearly watched this man die over and over and over again, and each time, he'd sacrificed all he could to keep that fate away. This kiss was not an admittance of juvenile feelings, soft and sweet and new, but a declaration of *love,* rooted and real and bright.

It wasn't the kind of thing to say aloud just yet, to mutter into Scar's

lips in the middle of their first truly mutual kiss, not while they were still learning the deepest corners of the other's soul. But his heart beat with it, pumped the revelation through him like he needed it to live. Each rush of adrenaline that clouded Grian's thoughts came with the whisper of that most sacred of sensations .

Lightheaded and floating, Grian nipped at Scar's bottom lip. He opened his eyes just for the briefest second to see the way his action materialized into the deepest blush across the other's face. As a reward, he was kissed harder, and all thought of savoring the sight for longer was stolen with his breath.

God, he *loved* Scar. He wanted to spend every day with him, wanted to forget the world for him, wanted to bend to the point of breaking for the sole purpose of remaining beside him. Scar kissed back like he was experiencing the same mind-numbing manifestation. For both of them, even though it would be a while still until it shifted into words and truth and certainty, this was an opening of the heavens themselves.

Nothing Grian could've imagined was better than the reality. Sparks enveloped him entirely, every touch like a fire against his skin. Grian's head spun, static replacing any hope for coherent thoughts. Scar tasted like a home-cooked meal, smelled like a warm spring afternoon, felt like the rawest form of adoration.

Grian wanted to memorize every tiny detail of his being, soak him in until his heart matched his shape exactly. There was a little divot in the corner of his mouth, where an old injury had healed over. The vet let his hands traced along the mark that curved with his jaw. Infinitely more depictions of complicated history decorated his skin, waiting to be discovered by endless curiosity.

Scar's lips became soft, though they remained insistent, while his hands trailed down to the belt loops of the vet's pants. Grian gasped into the kiss as he was yanked forward, collapsing atop the other man. Not an ounce of space was left between them, and it sent an

exhilarating burst of pure need through Grian like none he'd known before. Judging by the feel of Scar's smile, it was just as he'd intended.

An undeniable joy bubbled up in their shared space, infectious and gentle and furious all at the same time. They kissed until it seemed time itself would stop at their will, until no one existed beyond them. They kissed until there wasn't an ounce of misunderstanding or unspoken emotion between them. They kissed until they couldn't any longer, and then more still.

When they finally broke apart to breathe, a quiet laughter left them. Grian sat up and rolled off Scar, smiling wide enough to hurt his cheeks. He took in the sight of his companion from slightly further away. Scar's face was flushed, lips pink, hair a mess. He was terribly handsome, the kind of person that deserved to be kissed until he couldn't remember how to stop.

"I like you," Grian said, still short of breath from both the view and the exertion. "Just in case you haven't figured that out yet."

"It might've occurred to me," Scar mused. He laced their fingers together, softening at the perfect way they fit. "I like you too, Grian. Ever since you saved my life in an alleyway ages ago, I've been head over heels for you."

"I doubt that," the vet scoffed through his flushed face, shifting closer so that their limbs could tangle together and they could close the distance again should they wish. "You definitely wanted me dead for a second there."

"That's part of your charm, Doctor," Scar replied. "You're blunt and reckless and infuriatingly smart and absolutely perfect for me. I wouldn't have you any other way."

“And now, you *do* have me.” Grian cupped his face, letting his thumb trace along his villain’s bottom lip. “Wholly and completely.”

Scar smiled, leaning in and kissing him, soft and sweet and slow.

They stayed there for another hour, exchanging quiet words in between lovely actions. When sleep pulled at both of them, urging them into mutual unconsciousness, they remained by each other’s sides, knowing that in the morning to come, neither would be alone.

For the first time in a very long while, Grian was not by himself during his walk home.

It was rare that his schedule ever allowed him and Mumbo to get off their shift at the exact same moment, but that day was the exception. The two of them clocked out together, bid farewell to Skizz as he took their place, and then started down the street in the same direction.

Of course, Mumbo wasn’t able to follow him for the entire journey. He tended to just walk a couple blocks up to his preferred bus stop, which was right beside a shop he frequented that sold cheap electronic junk. Grian’s friend was a bit of a collector of old video games in his spare time, and claimed that this particular store was the most likely place in the entire city for him to encounter antique consoles for a decent price.

He wouldn’t judge, so long as it meant he got to have a good conversation during his usually-monotonous walk.

“Grian, you must understand that I *tried* the method of just patting the poor thing between the shoulders to see if it would come out like that first,” Mumbo complained. “It wasn’t working! That’s why I switched!”

The other vet was actively regaling Grian with a tale about one of his patients from earlier that day. An elderly man who lived nearby the clinic had brought his dog – an adolescent spaniel – in to receive urgent help, as the poor thing was actively choking on a mouse it had tried and failed to swallow without chewing.

Mumbo was quick to take action, beginning the process of dislodging the mouse through the typical means. The simpler methods were not working, so he naturally moved on, as he was supposed to do. However, the elderly man turned out to have quite a few things to say when he watched his little dog get held upside-down while the heimlich maneuver was being performed.

Instead of assuming that the vet knew best, he began to berate and even physically try to pull Mumbo away. Had Grian’s friend not been the overly-large man that he was, it was entirely possible that the spaniel could’ve been dropped on its head from the fuss that its owner was kicking up.

Apparently, two techs had to pry him off Mumbo’s arm so that things could proceed as planned. Luckily, from there, as Grian was told, it didn’t take long before the mouse’s tail was visible and it was able to be pulled free. The dog was fine, but the owner continued to cause them trouble for several minutes afterwards.

Grian had intended to keep listening to the story, but he received a text. He pulled his phone out, pleased to see that it was Scar, and a photo had been attached to his message featuring Maui caught in the act of trying to steal food off a frying pan.

Your Favorite Guy 🍆

He acts like I'm not standing right next to the oven. You need to teach your son some manners!

Grian smiled at the ridiculous comment, typing a quick mindless response and sending it off. Before he could stuff his phone back in his pocket, however, Mumbo piped up from directly beside his ear, "Who are you texting? What in the world is that contact name?"

The vet startled, nearly dropping his phone in his mad scramble to turn off the screen. He whipped around, face flushing and mouth agape. "My God! Don't do that to a man!"

"Grian," Mumbo started slowly. They'd ceased their walking to face one another, the mustached man narrowing his eyes in dangerous contemplation. "Are you… hiding something from me?"

"What?" Grian laughed nervously. "No, never!"

His friend gasped, "You *are!"*

Grian had only a split second to dodge out of the way as Mumbo jumped at his phone, trying to snatch it from him. That was not enough to escape, however. His fellow vet could, on occasion, overcome his crippling social anxiety when he had something much larger to focus on. Unluckily for Grian, this was one such scenario.

He shrieked as two massive arms wrapped around him and lifted him clean off the ground. "Put me down!"

“No! Tell me the truth! Who is that man you’re texting? Why does his name have a ring next to it?” Mumbo exclaimed his questions, not caring about the stares they were drawing from the handful of other people on the sidewalk. A dramatic gasp left him. “Wait a minute… Am I not your favorite guy anymore?”

He did put Grian down then, only to grab him by the shoulders and shake him wildly back and forth.

“That’s it, huh? You’ve got a new best friend? You’ve *replaced* me?” Mumbo shouted, bottom lip sticking out like a pouting child, “What could I have possibly done to deserve this? Why do you hate me? What does he have that I don’t?”

“Mumbo, no! Calm down! You’re still my best friend,” the vet insisted. Mumbo stopped, sniffling through theatrical sadness. “I promise I’m not replacing you.”

“Really?” His companion regarded him cautiously. “Then, what is he to you?”

Grian sighed, stuck in a dead end situation. It wasn’t able to be avoided any longer. He couldn’t believe the information was going to come out this way, but he had no other choice. Taking a deep breath in, he readied himself. “He’s my partner.”

Mumbo fell silent.

“I wasn’t keeping secrets from you or anything,” Grian added, growing nervous. “We’ve only been officially dating for a couple of days now, but we’ve known each other for a while, and this was long overdue.”

Mumbo blinked. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Grian agreed. *“Oh.”*

He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting from his best friend of several years, but a quiet *‘oh’* wasn’t it. In fact, when Scar had let it slip to Lizzie and Jimmy the morning after their kiss, the reaction had been instantaneous and *huge*.

Lizzie had practically tackled Scar to the ground in a hug, exclaiming, “I knew you’d man up eventually!”

Jimmy, on the other hand, had pulled Grian aside and threatened him with a slow, painful death for half an hour if he ever so much as thought about breaking Scar’s heart. He described specifically something about a rollercoaster, a fall from a great height, and removed tracks. Given the vet was still in the hazy phase in which he couldn’t believe Scar liking him back was not one big fever dream, that lecture hadn’t done much to phase him.

Needless to say, Mumbo’s reaction was significantly more toned down, even when he did open his mouth to speak again.

“Well, that’s just… nice, isn’t it? I’m very happy for you,” the other vet said, slow and dazed. He sounded distant, despite standing only a foot away. “Ecstatic, even. This is a momentous occasion.”

“Uh, Mumbo? Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” Mumbo said, in the most un-okay tone of all time. He turned and began walking again. “I am doing a *really* awesome job

of not freaking out, actually. Like, a super awesome job. You should be proud of how normal I am acting at this moment in time."

Grian raised a brow, following him. "What's there to freak out about?"

"Nothing at all," Mumbo replied quickly, steps speeding up. "Except for the fact that you, Grian, are a man who did not, until a couple of months ago, have a single friend outside of me and Skizz, and now you're suddenly a hotshot in the dating scene? How did you even meet this man?"

The vet winced. "It's *really* hard to explain."

"I've got time," Mumbo announced. "Plenty of it."

He did not, in fact, have time. His bus stop was right ahead, and it wouldn't be long until the next bus came by. Besides, no amount of time could prepare Mumbo for the shock of the true story behind his and Scar's first meeting. Grian opted for the next best thing – a half-truth.

"We met when I was on my way home from work," he fabricated. "He needed me to fix up his… cat."

God, he hoped his thought process hadn't been as loud as he felt like it was. Mumbo was still staring at him with that disturbing neutrality – so rigid that Grian was pretty sure he was manually making himself blink at regular intervals.

Finally – blessedly – Mumbo relented. He sighed, shoulders slumping, and slapped Grian on the back. "Well, I'm happy for you, mate.

Really, I am."

"You are?" Grian brightened.

"I mean," Mumbo started. "So long as you promise that I can still be your *second* favorite guy. Then, it's alright, I guess."

"Of course. You definitely are," Grian assured, chuckling. "And you're not going to freak out anymore?"

"Probably not. Don't misunderstand, though!" Mumbo stepped closer to the bus stop, pointing an accusing finger in Grian's direction. "I still think the world's flipped on its head, and I *will* be buying a lottery ticket before going home tonight. If you can get lucky and fall for the first person you speak to that isn't your coworker, I can bring in the big bucks."

The vet huffed out a laugh. "Goodnight, Mumbo. Get home safely. Love you."

"Love you too," Mumbo called.

Grian was alone during the remainder of his trip home. He didn't mind the alone time, as it gave him the opportunity to daydream in his brief moments without anyone around to observe him. For a late autumn afternoon, it was surprisingly warm. The sun shone through fluffy clouds, and the wind was not blowing.

The trees that lined the street were mostly devoid of leaves now, but some still clung onto their hues of brown, red, and yellow. Those that had abandoned theirs left a scattered, crunching carpet underfoot.

Grian enjoyed the ambient noise of his steps mixed with the rustling of branches overhead as he approached his apartment building.

Immediately upon entering his front door, he heard the sound of laughter. It brought an involuntary smile to his face. Grian found Scar sprawled out on the floor with Maui attacking one of his feet, and Pearl lounging on his chest.

Scar's crutch was a few feet away, and his chair was parked closer to the couch. If Grian had to guess, the other had started out sitting in front of the television, and had rolled onto the floor at the request of two very bored cats.

"Look who's the life of the party over here," Grian mused as he stepped closer. Scar's eyes shot open, his already grinning face growing even more ecstatic at the sight of the vet. "I'm home."

"Welcome back!" Scar was quick to shoo Maui away and gently remove Pearl, though both were not pleased to lose their entertainment. "Here, help me up."

Grian did so, gently getting the other to his feet and offering an arm should Scar need it. He was denied, however, when the other decided to instead dive forward and seal their lips together in a quick kiss. Scar tasted like overly-sugary strawberries – likely something to do with the cupcakes he'd baked the night prior.

Grian hummed as he pulled away. "You added frosting?"

"Homemade," Scar confirmed. He ducked down to grab his crutch. "I had Lizzie take me to the store, since I was bored while you were gone and her SUV fits my chair better than Jimmy's little sports car. She insisted I make it strawberry."

“Tastes good,” Grian teased, licking his lips. Scar’s eyes flashed with interest, but the vet raised a hand to stop him before he could lean back in. “I’d like to taste them the correct way now.”

“Fine,” the other sighed. He moved like he was going to head towards the kitchen, but spun around unexpectedly and managed to earn himself one more fleeting kiss. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too,” Grian whispered, and together, they disappeared into the kitchen, a feast of sweets awaiting them.

Grian shifted the grocery bag onto his other arm, foggy breath fanning out in front of him in the chilly evening air.

“You’ve reached my voicemail,” Scar’s tone chimed through the phone, familiar and vaguely robotic. *“I’m sorry I missed your call. Please leave a message after the beep.”*

Beep.

“Hey, Scar,” Grian started, glancing down at his assortment of products. “I got the butter, garlic, and, uh, sort of got the spaghetti? They were out of the regular kind, so I got the angel hair one instead. Is that going to ruin it?”

He considered his question, sighing at its stupidity. No doubt he would be mocked as soon as he was home for even bothering to ask it.

“They look the same, so I’m assuming not,” Grian grumbled, imagining the lovely way Scar’s face was sure to scrunch up as he teased him, making any amount of ridicule wholly worth it. “I know you won’t answer until you’re done chatting with Lizzie and Timmy, but I thought I’d call anyway.”

The Bamboozlers were currently meeting up at his apartment. Since Scar’s health had improved to a promising degree, they’d opted to begin planning their return to the scene. The fact that the progress on Scar’s leg seemed to have completely plateaued did not dissuade anyone from the idea of getting back into the game. They claimed it would just be a new dynamic for them to work around, and that they needed extra challenges to keep the job interesting lately.

Besides, they couldn’t remain stationary forever if they wanted to get revenge on the Gs and figure out what was going on with the CEO.

Jimmy had even put in an order for extra crutches and a new chair for Scar so that he could have specific mobility aids to match their costumes. He’d allowed Grian to fill them in on which models were probably best, and then the three of them had gone crazy with customization of colors and whatnot.

“So, uh, I’m going to buy you a coffee to apologize just in case I *did* ruin our dinner,” Grian went on. “If you see this soon, text me an order, otherwise I’m guessing.”

Grian hung up and came to a stop in front of a café he’d never encountered before. Heading to the grocery store after work these days usually resulted in him taking unique routes, so most businesses weren’t known to him. It was an odd hour of the night, just a little after eight, meaning a lot of shops had closed down.

This café was nondescript, not a place that particularly stood out to him, but it was the only one open on the block. He entered, got himself a hot chocolate, and Scar a black coffee. He supposed they could add any milk or sugar at home should it be necessary. Lizzie and Jimmy likely would have left by the time he arrived, so he didn't bother worrying about getting them drinks.

The cold of the open air was jarring as he stepped out again. He kept his eyes trained on the ground, shivering as he moved to walk back down the sidewalk. Grian sipped his hot chocolate, willing the warmth to travel through him as best it could.

"Excuse me?"

The vet glanced up, eyes landing on a familiar figure. He tensed, fear rocketing down his spine. His groceries nearly toppled out of his hands, saved at the last minute by a jerk of his arm. Both of Grian's drinks were not so lucky, slipping and spilling themselves onto the concrete below.

"Oh, isn't that a shame?" A robotic voice tutted, "What a waste…"

Just ahead of him, looming in the middle of the sidewalk, was a man draped in a glistening black cloak. His shocking blue hair was visible even from several feet away, and his staff was unmistakable. Grian knew him well. He saw him all over television, on magazine covers, and in his memories.

"Morphling?"

"Hello again." Morphling stood in front of him, electricity crackling from the end of his staff, which was poised by his side. His mouth was curved up into a smile, but something was off about it. "Could I

trouble you for a moment of time?"

Though it was phrased innocently enough, the vet couldn't shake the pit that had opened in his stomach. He took a step back, frowning.

"Uh, I'd really rather not," he said gingerly. "I need to get home. My boyfriend's making dinner, and he needs these ingredients."

"I'm sure you do have places to be, but this is *very* important," Morphling said again. The night, if it was possible, grew even colder. "It's something only you can help with. Your boyfriend will be fine if we delay your lovely evening by a little while, won't he?"

"Um, maybe… Still, I don't really–"

Grian trailed off when he checked over his shoulder and noticed another figure stepping out of an alleyway a little further down the street. Cloaked in scarlet, wearing a black mask over the lower half of her face, was none other than Daybreak.

Her expression was exactly as hostile as it was during the interview he'd seen months prior. She didn't bother to greet him, or pretend her presence wasn't a clear threat. Two heroes cornering him while he was alone wasn't a coincidence, especially not these specific individuals. Grian recognized the true amount of danger he was in, nausea welling up in his gut.

He wished he could say he was surprised. It was always just a matter of time before the consequences of his actions caught up with him. Honestly, he was half-expecting to see Necromancer step out of the shadows too, brandishing her poison arrows to strike him down, but it seemed only Daybreak and Morphling would be joining them tonight.

It didn't matter. One hero was one too many for a regular, powerless civilian to face on his own. This wasn't a situation Grian would be able to escape, and for as long as Scar was in a meeting with his teammates, his phone was as good as dead in his pocket. Not like calling the police would do anything either – the authorities would never interfere with Agency affairs.

Grian straightened, resigning himself to a fate that had, not more than a few months ago, been unimaginable to him. "Fine. I'll do what you want."

"Perfect," Morphling laughed lightly. "Come here, and I'll–"

He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt, stopping Grian's heart. The situation was getting more and more daunting with every passing moment. He wanted it to slow down, leave him alone, give him room to think. Grian wished so intently that he blurted without really considering his words, "I only have one request first."

Morphling paused, his grin widened the slightest bit more. "A request? And what would that be?"

Grian swallowed, glancing around, relieved to find something of use right under his nose. The vet bent and collected his two now-empty cups. Their contents had long since soaked into the ground, but they were still warm to the touch. He held them up for the heroes to see.

"Let me go inside and throw these away," he asked. "I'd hate to litter."

It was a terrible excuse, all things considered, but it startled a huff of laughter out of Morphling, and a snort from Daybreak. The heroes

shared a look, engaging in a silent back and forth. Then, miraculously, they *agreed.*

"Alright, but be quick," Morphling dismissed. Grian nodded, and immediately spun on his heel, starting towards the café. "Oh, but Grian?"

The vet tensed at the sound of his name. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder. Morphling's smile had turned into a sneer.

"Remember," he said, his modulator crackling. "There's nowhere you can run that we cannot find you."

Grian nodded, and walked right back into the café. The cups were dumped into the trash can by the door, but he didn't stop there. He rushed up to the register, putting his grocery bag on the counter. The cashier gave him a strange look, obviously confused.

"If a man comes looking for me soon, give him this," Grian said, all too aware of the seconds ticking by. If he hesitated too long here, the heroes would follow him. "Tell him I've gone for a walk in the park."

Blinking, the cashier took the bag, checking its contents. Grian didn't have time to say anything else. He opened his phone, and forwarded the name of the café to Scar. Then, he hid the device inside the innermost pocket of his jacket, praying it wouldn't be found. Steeling himself for what was bound to be a horrible encounter, he left the confines of the building.

A cold wind hit him. Morphling and Daybreak were waiting just beyond, the light of a street lamp casting damning shadows across their faces.

For the first time that evening, Daybreak spoke, “It’s cold out tonight, isn’t it? Shall we move somewhere warmer for our discussion?”

Grian gave a short nod, though he knew what her involvement at this stage meant for him. The power of flight was a dangerous one in the hands of a kidnapper. In a matter of moments, they were all going to be ages away from this location. Scar would have no hope of catching up.

Daybreak stepped forward, taking the handcuffs from her teammate and gesturing for the vet to meet her in the middle. He did so with little fanfare, swallowing back his pride, fear, and his overwhelming urge to run. Those things would do no good in his situation. The heroes were not lying when they told him he could not escape.

He was only able to wince as the cold metal clicked around his wrists.

“Perfect,” Daybreak hummed. She moved to the side, wrapping one arm tightly around his torso. “Now, try not to scream.”

Then, the ground disappeared out from underneath them.

Grian was gone.

Chapter End Notes

> THANK YOU FOR 180K HITS!! And thanks as well to everyone who waited so patiently and gave me grace when the world worked against me while I was trying to get this chapter out! I hope you enjoyed these 24.9k words that I wrote in the span of a week. I am TIRED!
>
> Now, I'm going to get right to the important bits:

First, I have a something new available on my twitter, tumblr, and discord! Check it out! It's still in the planning phase, so it'll be a little bit, but it's exciting all the same! Special thanks to my friend, Vale, for helping me out here.

Secondly, some of you may have noticed by now that the chapter count has, once again, increased! I've worked with my beta readers, Cody and Smiif, and we've made this decision based on what we collectively agree to be a better pacing for the fic. We are nearing the end, though, and this is probably the last time I'll make a change to the chapter count.

Third, the recipe within this chapter is a real recipe. I've decided to include the website from which it came in this note in case any were interested. You can find that here!

And as always, for more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! I also have a discord server which you can join here! If I delay posting or run into issues, it'll be spoken about in those places first. See you - I sincerely hope - next Tuesday!!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: Please be aware before reading that all tags will apply for the next several chapters, most especially the unpleasant ones.
>
> Apologies for the late upload. Here's 37.8k words as penance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you *have* to leave?”

Scar’s voice broke through the quiet of the bedroom, barely coherent as sleep still clung to his lips, slurring his words. He raised a hand and gently wiped at his eyes, blearily opening them. Morning light trickled in through half-opened curtains, shining their warmth down upon the bed. Still, it was colder beneath the covers than Scar would’ve liked. The temperature change was what roused him from the depths of unconsciousness, gently at first, and then uncomfortably fast when he felt the shifting of the mattress.

A week and a half had gone by since that fateful evening, in which Grian had caught Scar in a lie. In just that short period, his world had changed a million times over in the most indescribable ways. A week and a half of limbs tangled together as they fell into unconsciousness, sleepy kisses exchanged at the first signs of dawn, meals cooked over quiet conversation, laughter echoed through lively rooms. A week and a half of Grian being completely and totally his.

And, after a week and a half of waking up beside *his boyfriend,* Scar had begun to get used to his new, wonderful sleeping arrangement. Which meant, simply put, that he noticed when it was disrupted.

The bed directly next to him was empty, devoid of the form he so dearly longed to hold close. Grian’s absence was so severely wrong in his mind that almost all remaining signs of sleep disappeared. Scar sat

up, gaze finding his missing person sitting on the edge of the bed.

Grian was clearly tired as well. His dark eyes were barely blinking back sleep, barely keeping themselves open. Scar was torn between wanting them to open further, so he could behold their obsidian shine, or wanting them to close again, so he could bask in the pleasure of holding the man in his arms again.

Grian was hesitating, obviously trying to hype himself up to stand. Despite that, he sighed, and replied, “Yes, I do.”

Scar’s heart lurched at the sound of that rasping morning voice, and his stomach was filled with butterflies embarrassingly quickly. He couldn’t help but sit up, letting his arms snake around his boyfriend’s waist to pull him in for an embrace. Scar fit perfectly against the curve of Grian’s spine, warm and complete, like a puzzle clicking together. He allowed himself to burrow further, burying his face in the crook of the other’s neck.

Scar took a deep breath in, simply enjoying how it felt to be so close, to have this man within his grasp, to linger in his presence simply because he could. Grian smelled like sweet shampoo and earthy cologne when he wasn’t wearing his scrubs, in those moments that were reserved solely for the two of them. Scar pressed a kiss against his skin, slow and gentle, just because he could. He listened carefully to the soft sound of contentment it drew from his companion. Those beautiful eyes fell shut, tension leaving the air around them.

Encouraged, Scar tilted his head and left a trail of featherlight kisses up Grian’s neck to his jaw. His mouth paused beside the other’s ear for just long enough to relay his desperate plea, “Don’t go, Doctor. Stay here with me.”

Grian shivered, sucking in a breath. Scar waited for his head to tip

back, for them to be face-to-face, for his boyfriend to be on the brink of denying him, before he made his move. Luckily for him, Grian was wonderfully predictable in that way.

Not a moment later, just as Scar had anticipated he would, Grian leaned back into him and said, “Scar, I *can’t* just–”

Before he could finish, Scar stole the words off his lips. He infused this kiss, as he did all of them recently, with the months of longing that had been building inside of him. Now that he was allowed such luxuries, he never missed the opportunity to ensure the man he adored knew it in every possible way.

Their kiss grew thick with the tension of a dimmed alleyway, the quiet calm of an evening spent together on the couch, the comfort of a freshly-bandaged wound, the laughter of a blossoming dinner table, and the desperation of a crush left to fester while the two involved danced around one another.

Grian hummed, melting into the offering of sensations. Scar hoped he knew how badly he yearned to keep him close forever, and how intensely he missed him when he was gone. He allowed his hands to wander, squeezing the other tighter to him, deeper into their embrace.

Just as Grian’s own hands raised, attempting to cup Scar’s face, wanting to hold him in the same way he was being held, Scar pulled back. Grian, obviously not expecting to lose contact quite so abruptly, tried to lean in and catch him again. Unfortunately, he wasn’t fast enough. Scar put a finger against his lips.

Grian’s brows furrowed, gaze darting to the barrier placed firmly between them and then up to Scar again. Donning the most alluring expression he could manage, Scar smiled, letting his finger tap

playfully on his lips. “It’s not hard to get what you want, Doctor.”

“Oh yeah?” Grian reached up, taking the hand that stood in his way. Scar nearly forgot his purpose as circles were traced atop his knuckles, and half-lidded eyes focused the whole of their weight on him. In the rays of the morning sun, his boyfriend was unfairly pretty. “And what exactly do you mean by that, Scar?”

His name sounded so lovely from those lips. Scar wanted to shut him up more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life. He forced himself to focus, willing his easily-swayed mind to remember what he would gain should he be able to coax this arrangement from his boyfriend.

“All you have to do is call out of work,” Scar said. “And I’m yours for the entire day.”

Grian’s expression shifted quickly into one of irritation, a scoff leaving him. “Right, I should’ve guessed as much.”

He pried Scar’s grip from his waist and stood. Cold rushed in to fill the space he’d occupied. Grian didn’t say a word to Scar as he changed into his scrubs, knowing well how they might be weaponized in another attempt to keep him there longer, then left to fix his bedhead in the bathroom. Scar groaned, dropping backwards into the pillows. Grian’s scent still lingered there, mocking him in his absence.

He resigned himself to lamenting over the tragedy of his situation while staring up at the ceiling. Scar had, in all honesty, a never-ending list of minor inconveniences that irritated him moment to moment. At the top was, of course, the fact that the morning could not stretch onwards eternally, so he could savor each honey-dipped second without interruption.

It was hard to believe Scar had gone from being an endlessly feared villain to the type of man to linger in his partner's bed and long for his return before he'd even left. This part of life was new territory to him. It didn't contain problems that could be solved by punching a hero or stealing classified documents. Everything he wanted had to be handled through healthy communication, and even then, could still be turned down.

God, he couldn't believe Grian wasn't even *considering* calling out of work after his ploy with the kiss. That move was supposed to be enchanting, something that no sane person could deny. Scar had always thought his charms were irresistible, but his stubborn doctor was determined to prove him wrong.

How had he, somebody who defied fate and cheated death time and time again, fallen into such a bout of bad luck due to one singular person? How had he, somebody adept at not only wordplay but manipulation, been given one that was immune to his whims? How had he, somebody capable of providing for every want and need of his partner, to the point of making work obsolete for them, found the one man on the entire planet who actually *enjoyed* his job?

Grian could've quit the minute he met Scar, just demanding compensation for his life-saving treatment, but he hadn't. His practice was his passion, not a thing done with the intent of earning money, so no amount of gained fortune could've drawn him from it. Scar despised that fact openly, wishing his doctor were selfish, spoiled, immature – anything that might keep him *home* for once!

But that was never to be. He was alone under the covers for yet another morning, simply because Grian was a good man with a good heart doing good work. Life was cruel, and this was Scar's penance for his every sin.

The villain must've dozed off a bit by accident somewhere in the mix. His memory of the world around him grew blurry and time waved in

odd patterns. When he stirred again, it was to a hand cupping his face. A kiss was pressed to his forehead, causing him to grunt in surprise and sit up.

"Oh," Grian said, realizing he'd woken the other while he pulled away. He was in a much more put-together state now, unfortunately. "I was about to get going. Do you need me to grab you anything from the store for tonight?"

"Um," Scar trailed off, considering the question. He had a handful of ideas for meals he could make. The vet would be gone until a little later, so dinner food would be what he was referring to at the moment, which helped narrow it down. The brief haze of recent sleep, however, made it slightly more difficult to remember coherent recipes.

After a moment of indecision, Scar gave up and spouted a few mindless ingredients. A pasta dish would be simple, but good. Most importantly, it meant his boyfriend wouldn't have to spend ages in the grocery store. He could come home to Scar far faster.

Not that he would tell Grian about those hidden motives, though.

Scar got out of bed only to walk Grian to the door, sighing loudly for the entire trip.

"I'll be back soon," the doctor repeated for the hundredth time. "Remember that Lizzie and Timmy are coming over later to discuss your plans. That'll help the hours go faster, won't it?"

His boyfriend gave him a parting kiss, which Scar immediately attempted to weaponize by deepening, but was not successful. Grian pulled back, gave him that usual, devastatingly disapproving smile,

and left.

His day was mostly uneventful without Grian or the other Bamboozlers around. Scar was used to boredom since his injury. He could waste hours playing with the cats, secretly thinking up ways to redesign the apartment around him, or going through his boyfriend's watch history on the television to see what movies he most enjoyed. It wasn't much different from how he wasted days in between heists, except everything felt a lot lonelier now.

And that wasn't a factor he'd noticed before getting shot — before Grian became more than someone he just visited every now and again. He had a taste of what it was like to not be by himself, a taste of relying on someone for even the most basic of things. It was embarrassing when he was at his worst, just conscious enough to process that he was too useless to change his own clothes or sit up without help, but he got over that, and it got better.

Suddenly, Grian was by his side constantly. They were laughing, making snide comments, arguing over phrases together. They were relearning how to walk, dancing through the kitchen, cursing the expensive nature of mobility aids. They were reading in the early evening, sharing in domestic chores, whispering words of total adoration between early morning kisses. Scar never had time to feel alone or lesser than while in Grian's company.

So, recovery *was* beautiful in those little ways, giving him gifts he couldn't take for granted, but nothing was without its downsides.

The aforementioned loneliness was the result of quite a few of his own personal shortcomings. It was impossible to be with Grian every hour of the day, but he yearned for some amount of socializing to keep him going. The apartment was fairly devoid of that sort of entertainment.

Though Grian said it probably would be fine, Scar didn't quite trust his own reaction time enough to get behind the wheel of a car just yet, meaning he couldn't leave the apartment without a great amount of effort put into getting somewhere. Lizzie and Jimmy drove him around when they could, but both of them had lives beyond him. He was alone without his three closest companions.

Which meant, of course, that he had long periods of time to spend simply getting to know himself all over again.

It was no secret that Scar's body had changed. Recovery or not, he could feel it in his energy levels and weakened muscles. Grian said he was fairly sure the poison, especially with how long it had plagued him, had caused some amount of permanent damage. He'd hardly reacted to that news, having guessed something like that was going on when physical therapy stopped working as well – not that he was exactly *thrilled* to have his theories confirmed.

Although, he would've been lying if he were to say he had one clear opinion on the matter. Scar's emotional state had been floating in an odd limbo between sadness and indifference since the discovery. Something solidly bittersweet occupied his heart recently, never leaning in a particular direction.

On one hand, Scar probably wouldn't ever be up to his previous physical standards, which would impact him every day for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, he knew that both the people in his life and his own ambitions could not be so easily deterred by a weak nervous system – a fact that was demonstrated to him for the hundredth time as his Bamboozlers arrived at the apartment for their meeting.

"Scar," Lizzie said when he answered the door. She burst through so violently that she nearly knocked him off his crutch, but he was a lot better at steadying himself these days, so he didn't fall. She got into his face, eyes sparkling with a level of excitement she usually reserved

for occasions in which she was allowed to cause extreme amounts of property damage. “Guess what?”

Scar raised a brow, already feeling himself start to smile from her contagious energy. “What?”

“Your new wheelchair arrived today,” she announced, throwing her arms up. “Jimmy, tell him the good news!”

Jimmy stepped through the door, closing it behind him so the neighbors wouldn’t overhear. There was a file clutched under his arm. He was also grinning and shifting his weight from foot to foot, meaning he was aching to blurt something. Jimmy restrained himself from immediately blurting anything, starting instead with, “Remember when I told you Tango offered to kit out your new ride?”

“Yeah, vaguely,” Scar replied. He turned and started to lead them back in the direction of the living room. It was a conversation that they’d gone over not long ago. While most heists would ideally be held when Scar had the energy for his crutch, preparations had to be made in case the chair was the wiser option on a particular day.

“Well,” Jimmy hummed, sharing a look with Lizzie. “He showed us some of the blueprints for his ideas today.”

“Oh yeah? And I assume that’s what you’re holding right now?”

“Maybe,” Jimmy said, not subtle in the slightest. They settled on the couch and Scar was passed the file. “Take a look! I think some of them are *really* cool, but he’ll only install what you want.”

Scar's eyes nearly jumped out of his head at the sight of the first chair redesign. "Are those rocket boosters?"

"Yes!" Lizzie rocked back and forth in place, too thrilled to join them on the couch. "He says that you could even *fly* if he can figure out how to build it correctly."

"Flying? In my chair?"

Scar tried to lose himself in that mental image – a street full of enemies, just him and his Bamboozlers against the world. The most impulsive part of himself took over, and he pictured how amazing it might be to soar over the heads of his enemies, all without having to stand once. Their opponents' faces would be priceless, better than any heist.

He was about to get excited, about to join them in their raving, when a new voice joined him in his head. This one sounded the slightest bit like Grian. It made him consider the logistical side of the matter.

How would he steer something as large as a chair through tight alleyways, which the group often used to escape? Would it be fast enough to outrun an arrow, or would he be a sitting duck up in the air as it puttered along? Why would he even *need* to fly, especially when they already had extremely reliable grappling hooks to get around?

"Um," he trailed off. "Let me check out the other designs before I pick."

Tango was an undeniable genius when it came to inventions. As he flipped through the possible options, Scar could see his talents on full display. It was, however, equally as obvious that he had no idea how to actually improve upon the specific design of a wheelchair. His

suggested advancements were regular technological improvements, like weapons — things that would require Scar to learn more new skills on top of learning to fight while in his chair.

“These are great, guys, really,” Scar said, closing the file and setting it aside. Jimmy and Lizzie both seemed to freeze, unsure of how to take that. “None of them are quite right, though, you know? Would you mind if I sent you back to Tango with a list of possible options?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Jimmy stammered. “But you really don’t like the other designs? Maybe flying was a lot, but what about the third blueprint? Built in speakers for our own theme music, and a fog machine under your seat for ambience! Isn’t that cool?”

Truthfully, Scar was not immune to the coolness factor those things would provide. Rolling up to a fight with music blaring out around them and fog highlighting their silhouettes was a tempting concept. However, the little voice of Grian residing in Scar’s head scoffed at Jimmy’s excitement over such inconvenient additions.

Machines like that would only weigh him down, and wouldn’t be used often enough to justify their existence, creating more problems than solutions in the long run. There were better ways to enhance his experience. He’d been researching during his ample free time with this in mind.

“How about we go for something more simplistic?” Scar suggested, “Maybe a strap around the middle to keep me in place during fights, or wheels that are more adept at making sharp turns or going through rough terrain. And if we’re trying to give Tango a challenge with this design, we could ask him to try and make some sort of camouflage mode in case we need to hide the chair super fast!”

Jimmy took back his files and sighed, “Yeah, I guess that makes more

sense. I'll let him know."

"I still think missile launchers on your armrests would be sick," Lizzie muttered, but she was quick to give up. She sunk into the armchair across from them. "Fine. Let's get down to business. We have to get back in the game. How are we doing that?"

Scar felt his mood heighten instantly. There was only one thing in the world that was equivalent to the joy he felt when Grian came home after a long day of work, and that was the thrill of a mission. He knew his Bamboozlers felt the same way, knew they were getting antsy without that rush, knew they wanted this as much, if not more than he did.

"We could do something flashy, but I don't want to do another heist of the century for a while," Scar proposed. "Does anyone have any specific ideas?"

"No more banks," Jimmy proposed. "I'm sick and tired of looking at shady flash drives."

And just like that, the joy was sucked out of the room.

"Great, Jim," Lizzie muttered. "I was hoping to forget about that mess for a while."

"You know we can't afford to do that, Liz," Jimmy huffed. "Or this arrow nonsense is going to happen again."

Scar *had* been filled in on the situation regarding the CEO and the complication with the heroes. The other two Bamboozlers were nice

enough to wait until the shock wasn't likely to kill him, and then the information was relayed. It was surprising at the same time as it absolutely made sense to him.

The Agency had always hated their guts. Statistically, a majority of villains that caught the eye of the heroes were arrested within the same year that they debuted. There were only two types of exceptions to that rule.

The first applied to the Tuff Guys. They were the kind of foes that weren't harmless, but weren't a major threat to public safety either. Zip, Cyclone, and Tripwire were great at causing a stir, without wishing imminent death on anyone in their vicinity. Their plans could often be thwarted with minimal effort from any given hero, and when they managed a rare success, it was usually only a monetary loss.

Keeping them around to repeatedly give their heroes someone to best was an obvious PR stunt for anyone with the eyes to see it. Defeating them, whether it ended in an arrest or not, meant a hero could add that to their list of accomplishments to heighten the Agency's overall approval rating as well.

The second exception was not due to the Agency's boundless mercy. They wore gas masks, boasted about the blood on their hands openly, and had never once been caught.

When presented with the two options, it was clear why an organization like the Agency would declare them the higher priority threat, and therefore unworthy of something like lawful justice.

So, it was a surprise, but not as much as he would've liked it to be. Not as much as it probably was for Grian, who'd been fed propaganda for years, or Lizzie, whose boyfriend was a major player in that same system. Those two felt compelled to think the best of their enemies,

subconsciously or otherwise. Jimmy was hesitant, given he had no outside influence, but he still lived with a level of trust in the heroes that should not have been afforded.

He understood their views, understood why they still had faith that their lives weren't constantly on the line, aside from the occasional accident, but Scar had known better. He had already felt their wrath. He had seen the moment the switch flipped, and their mercy ran out. He had felt the catalyst to all this new violence way before poison ever came into the equation.

After all, it was Scar, not his teammates, that had looked into Slayer's eyes as the arrow was fired.

He had stared at the face of the hero he'd fought for years, one he respected even through her failure to catch him, and he had trusted her to stick to their usual pattern — a few scratches and bruises, a valiant attempt at an arrest, and an inevitable escape.

Instead of any of that, just moments before she took aim with her crossbow, he'd seen something change within her.

It was hard to describe as anything other than the beginning of the end. Slayer's gaze had flashed with confusion beneath her leafy mask, and her stance had wavered. Scar watched her debate something for half a second, watched a world he couldn't see flicker over her expression. Then, in the same moment, it was wiped clean of everything Scar thought he knew.

An arrow plunged into his side, unexpected and quick. Not in a near miss, not an attempt to render one of his limbs useless. The tip buried into his gut with intention. He was too slow to stop it, too slow to stop his backwards stumble, too slow to do anything more than decrease the speed of his fall.

The last thing he'd seen was the blurry outline of the lights in the distance — the remains of the rooftop party they'd robbed — and Slayer's mouth opened as if in shock at her own actions.

And then, he was gone, knocked out cold by the immense pain.

The next time he would open his eyes, there would be a stranger kneeling at his side, offering a hand at his most vulnerable. Scar wouldn't have time to dwell on the situation until much later, and he wouldn't ever have the guts to speak his worries aloud to his team.

His worries that were now, at least partially, confirmed. Whether that old voicemail could be trusted, and the Watcher really wasn't aware of what was happening in her agency, or not, the heroes had changed. The playing field itself had changed. They would have to change too, or risk being crushed by the pressure.

"Jimmy's right that this situation can't be ignored," Scar agreed. Lizzie slumped, like she knew it too. "We're going to have to take into consideration that whatever prompted the heroes to lash out hasn't been dealt with yet. There's no telling how they'll react to us reappearing on the scene, especially with my new aids."

"Man, that's the part I'm most worried about," Jimmy sighed, leaning into the cushions behind him. "Do you think it'll just encourage them more? Us showing up again visibly affected, I mean."

"No telling," Lizzie replied. She ran hand over her face in contemplation. "Maybe it'll be enough for their sick revenge fantasies to see Scar in less-than-ideal condition, or maybe it won't. Until we know their motivations in more detail, we can't predict them."

“But if we don’t get back in the game soon, they’ll absolutely win,” Jimmy reminded her. “One way or another, they want us weakened or gone for sure.”

“So, we have to return with a bang,” Scar said. “Show them we *weren’t* weakened, and all they’ve done is make us angrier.”

The other two frowned, and Jimmy pursed his lips. “Scar,” he started. “You said, like, five seconds ago that you don’t want to do anything too show-stopping. We shouldn’t prioritize making a huge entrance over your health.”

“No, no, of course not,” Scar chuckled, reaching over to pat Jimmy on the back. “We’re creative enough to think of something else. Flashy and threatening, but not over-the-top. It’s not like we need money or supplies for another few months.”

“Hm, that does spark a couple of ideas,” Lizzie muttered. Her eyes sparked with a kind of knowing interest, and she chewed on her lip in thought. Scar recognized the expression, and their other teammate did as well.

“Oh, there it is,” Jimmy whispered, a grin stretching across his face. “Been a long time since I’ve witnessed one of Liz’s world-famous plans in the making. Something tells me this is gonna be good.”

Their meeting went on for another several hours, stretching into the evening and keeping them all entertained. It was fun, to be completely honest, trying to think of ways to avoid the heroes’ unpredictable wrath. They were throwing ideas around that would not have likely ever seen the light of day.

Jimmy suggested they find a way to steal something massive, like an

entire crane, from one of the many worksites around the city and leave it on the roof of the Agency. Scar proposed heading to the nearest theme park, discreetly tampering with any ride they could get their hands on, and then graffiti their names everywhere.

Lizzie thought neither idea would strike enough fear, though Scar was close to winning her over when he mentioned maybe doing it in broad daylight. “If we lock the park gates,” he said. “They’ll have nowhere to run where we could not reach them.”

“Oh, I’d *love* to see them trying to scramble over the barricades,” Jimmy cackled. “We could set the entrance on fire, and put money on which fences they try to hop first! I bet the Tuff Guys would add to the betting pool if we mentioned it to them.”

“You always want to mention everything to Tango,” Lizzie chided, rolling her eyes. “New plan. I say we hijack the whole park, and leave Jimmy and his disgusting crush stuck at the top of the ferris wheel until they sort themselves out.”

Jimmy’s eyes bulged, jaw dropping.

“Brilliant idea,” Scar agreed. “Hey, look! It’s already striking fear too!”

Their brainstorming and bickering went on for a while. Over the mix of shouted ideas, as well as Jimmy nearly hopping over the coffee table to wrestle Lizzie to the ground a couple of times, they did not notice Scar’s phone going to voicemail.

They did not notice a text dinging through.

They did not notice anything amiss, until thirty minutes after the hour Grian had promised to be home, when Scar realized the cats were growing needy without their owner around.

He grabbed his phone from where it'd been tossed aside in the chaos, and his brows furrowed in confusion.

A café?

Why had Grian sent the name of a café with no other details?

"What is it, Scar?"

Scar looked up. Lizzie and Jimmy had paused their fighting as much as they could, the latter still holding the former's hair in a vice grip as she tried to bat him away. "Um, I don't know. Grian sent a weirdly vague text."

They separated instantly to gather around the phone, though their visible confusion showed the name meant nothing to them either. "Hey," Lizzie spoke up. "There's a voicemail too."

Scar opened that unread message, turned up his volume, and pressed play.

"Hey, Scar," Grian's voice echoed through the speakers. There was a little bit of wind noise as well, likely indicating he was standing outdoors. *"I got the butter, garlic, and, uh, sort of got the spaghetti? They were out of the regular kind, so I got the angel hair one instead. Is that going to ruin it?"*

Scar felt a smile pull at his lips, even though his confusion had not ebbed. Grian really didn't have a clue about a lot of the finer details of cooking, and it was terribly amusing. Of all the problems to encounter, replacing the type of pasta was the least of Scar's worries.

"They look the same, so I'm assuming not," Grian grumbled, the rustling of a bag audible for a few seconds. *"I know you won't answer until you're done chatting with Lizzie and Timmy, but I thought I'd call anyway."*

The trio shared a sheepish look, realizing their own predictability.

"So, uh, I'm going to buy you a coffee to apologize just in case I did *ruin our dinner,"* Grian said, tone indicating he was wrapping up the one-sided conversation. *"If you see this soon, text me an order, otherwise I'm guessing."*

The message fell silent, ending with only a little more context gathered.

"He probably just wanted you to check out the menu for that café," Jimmy said. He and Lizzie backed off. "So that you would know what you'd want if you called back."

"Probably," Scar sighed, relaxing a bit. He went ahead and pressed Grian's contact name, immediately beginning to call him. The phone rang once, twice, a third time, but no answer came.

"You've reached my voicemail," said Grian's pre-recorded voice. *"I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message."*

Scar frowned, hanging up. “He didn’t answer.”

“Maybe he’s ordering right now,” Jimmy suggested, and Scar considered that possibility for a second, until he looked down at the timestamp.

“This call was made thirty minutes ago,” Scar relayed. “And the text was sent ten minutes after that. He should’ve been on the way home by now.”

Lizzie leaned back over. “Hey, I know that place. It’s not more than a ten minute walk away.”

“Oh,” Jimmy said. “That *is* a little strange.”

Scar didn’t jump to conclusions. He swiped through his phone until he found a specific folder. Inside, there was a single, unnamed app, one that had been coded for just such an occasion.

He waited for it to load, a view of the city map coming up with an icon he’d saved to represent Grian’s location. The circle in the middle of the screen spun around and around, trying to hone in on the exact spot that the tracker could’ve ended up. Homemade things like these weren’t always the most high-tech, but he didn’t mind a little wasted time if it meant figuring out where his beloved doctor had gone.

He waited, waited, waited, but it never stopped loading.

Scar blinked. He closed the app, reopened it, but the result didn’t

change.

"Guys, the tracker we put in his phone," he started, waving his friends back over. "Is it supposed to do this? Did it run out of battery or something?"

"Hm? The tracker? No, it's the long-lasting kind," Lizzie said. "The one I put in my boyfriend's phone is still fine even a year later. We haven't had Grian long enough to justify changing it out yet."

"Don't talk about him like he's a pet, Liz," Jimmy grumbled, but Scar barely heard him over the whirring in his head.

A ten minute walk. An out-of-place message. An unanswered call. A missing tracker. Grian's glaring absence.

Scar stood, relying so heavily on his crutch that he was worried it might break under his weight. His head spun, adrenaline shooting through him. He didn't wait for that to clear, starting towards the door, barely hesitating for a second to slip on his coat and shoes.

He had to go *now*.

"Scar, wait a minute," Lizzie called. She and Jimmy rushed to catch up with him. "Don't hurt yourself. We don't know for certain if something's wrong yet."

Scar opened the door and spared her a single glance over his shoulder. "I'd rather overreact than be too late."

He started down the hall, though a part of him already knew that he'd lingered for too long. Maybe if he'd seen the phone call come through, gotten the text at the right time, made Grian pick up more than just a handful of groceries, this could've been avoided.

But he hadn't, and because of that, Grian could be in trouble.

Scar made it out to the street, muscles seizing as he pushed himself to go faster, faster, *faster* than was really viable. Adrenaline numbed some of the pain, but shockwaves of it still traveled up his spine. He heard Lizzie and Jimmy scrambling after them, muttering to each other at the same time as they were attempting to coax him to slow.

"Scar, wait," Lizzie hissed, grabbing his arm. "Jimmy's bringing the car around."

"We don't have time," Scar replied, urgency fueling him enough to yank himself free. "There's a chance the heroes–"

"If the heroes really have him," Lizzie interrupted, tone sharp and commanding. "Then arriving sore and exhausted will only put Grian in more danger."

Jimmy's sports car pulled up to the curb. Lizzie pointed a single finger at it, eyes flashing.

"Get in."

Scar sighed, and did as he was told.

Thankfully, with that brief struggle resolved, nothing else needed to be said between them. The engine whirred as its gas pedal was floored, racing down the street at the same rate as Scar's mind spun. He felt every second that ticked by like a knife against his skin.

Please be alright, Scar repeated inwardly over and over again. *Please be a misunderstanding.*

"Liz, use my phone to call Tango for me," Jimmy said, though Scar only heard him distantly. "He's probably still finishing up at the garage, but he'll answer if he sees it's my contact."

Lizzie didn't make a comment like she might've otherwise done. She dialed the number, put it on speaker phone, and then held it up for Jimmy to speak into. It rang twice, and then a familiar voice came through.

"Hello? Jimmy?"

"Tango, hey," Jimmy started, not taking his eyes off the road as he made a turn that was much too fast. "Do you remember that chip you made for us to insert into that one civilian's watch?"

"Sheesh, yeah, man," Tango sighed. *"That was ages ago. I kinda forgot about it."*

"Track it," Jimmy said. "Now, and quickly."

The demanding tone from Jimmy, who was famous for never being short around the other villain ever, must've made Tango realize there was something serious on the line. There was shuffling from his end,

and then the clacking of keys.

“Oh no…”

Scar’s head snapped up, and Lizzie snatched the phone away, shouting, “What does that mean? Why did you say that?”

“Ah, I see everyone’s listening,” Tango laughed nervously. *“Well, uh, hopefully you weren’t hinging on that tracker too much.”*

“Why?” Scar joined in, “What happened?”

“It’s been disabled.”

The three shared a look, their worst fears being slowly confirmed. Scar felt a weight settle in his gut, and saw the other two slump in their seats.

“Thanks, man,” Jimmy muttered. “We have to go.”

Lizzie hung up. None of them could speak. None of them wanted to admit what they already knew. None of them wanted to admit the last of their hopes were draining away.

The café came into view. Jimmy pulled them towards the front, hastily getting out to help Scar to his feet. They paused in front of the door.

Somehow, their situation only got worse. Not only was Grian nowhere to be seen, but the lights were off through the windows, and the sign on the door said they wouldn't reopen for another twelve hours. Scar nearly collapsed, knees weak from a mix of anguish and his earlier strain. Lizzie caught his arm before that could happen.

"Scar, look," she said, pointing at something through the glass to the darkened interior. "The tables are still shining. They were wiped off recently."

"You're right!" Jimmy sucked in a breath, straightening. "The barista probably hasn't gotten far. I'll be back!"

Without another word, the other man shimmered out of view. He was not, however, lost to them. If Lizzie and Scar focused, the faintest sound of shoes scuffing on pavement, and a hand brushing against bricks could be heard. Jimmy was translucent and quiet, but to someone used to his presence, he couldn't be more visible.

They listened as their friend slipped away from them, around the corner of the building to where there was sure to be an employee door. The second he was out of earshot, Lizzie and Scar shared a look of concern.

If there really *was* a civilian to be found, especially under these dubious circumstances, Jimmy might act impulsively. They knew their teammate, knew how he could get when someone he cared about was threatened, and it wasn't always the most logical response. As quickly as they could with Scar's muscles protesting and Lizzie's assistance, they followed.

They were close to the corner when there came a sudden commotion. A crash echoed, and muffled, words were being shouted. Lizzie and Scar rushed over. When they finally arrived in the dimly lit employee

parking lot, they found the source of the disturbance.

Jimmy had a man pinned against a brick wall, arm over his chest to prevent him from moving. He waved to his friends, gesturing them over. The guy in his grasp was wearing a shirt with the café's logo printed on the sleeve, meaning he was likely the employee for whom they'd been searching.

Unfortunately, his face had gone pale with fear, and he was shaking so hard that he wasn't going to be worth questioning in the slightest. Despite the barista's terror, Jimmy seemed completely chipper. "I caught him as he was about to get in his car! Lucky, huh?"

"Yeah," Lizzie muttered. "We're so grateful that you've probably just sent our only witness into shock."

"You could pretend to be at least a little grateful," Jimmy grumbled, but he backed off. The barista gasped for air, dropping to his knees. "This delightful young man will be *more* than happy to help us. Won't you, bud?"

The poor stranger glanced up, stammering out a quiet, "H-Help you?"

"Yes," Jimmy continued. He knelt down, causing the other to scramble away from him. The villain didn't even flinch. "We have some questions."

Scar scoffed at his friend's threatening demeanor. In costume, they could afford to be brash, but they had to be more careful with their faces exposed. Jimmy, despite his usually carefree demeanor, was one who required more restraint in that particular area than the other two in their trio. He was always eager to pull the metaphorical trigger, make the first move.

It got him into trouble during their fights, but an undeniable bonus to his invisibility was that he could get out just as easily. Whereas Scar was calculated and confident, and Lizzie was exact and adept, Jimmy was free.

His powers could take him almost anywhere he needed to go, give him an advantage even in a losing fight. With Lizzie and Scar's plans to help him hone those skills, he was endlessly useful. If it meant he got a bit rowdy when acting on his own, then that was just something else they had to account for.

"I'm sorry for the scare," Scar said, stepping in before it could get worse. He had Lizzie help him set aside his crutch and kneel down. The barista was not as quick to pull away from him, mostly just watching the movements warily. "It wasn't our intention. We've had a very upsetting day, so you'll have to excuse my friend here. He can be a bit of a thug."

Once Lizzie ensured Scar was alright, she took Jimmy by the collar of his shirt and yanked him away, much to his chagrin. His retreat made the barista feel visibly better. Scar counted that as a good sign that this man might still have some use to him.

"Earlier, a friend of ours failed to come home. We believe you might've been the last person to see him before he vanished," Scar elaborated, and that caused the stranger to perk up. "Did you notice anything odd during your shift?"

"A missing person?" The barista opened and closed his mouth several times, fidgeting. "There *was* a customer that was acting strange a few hours ago – a shorter guy, with messy hair and some sort of doctor's getup. Is that who you mean?"

Scar's heart jumped into his throat. "Yes," he rushed to say. "Yes, I think it might be."

The look in the barista's eyes changed. They flickered with a permanent amount of confusion, caution, but now also an apparent curiosity. His walls lowered just enough.

"Well, um, I guess that means you're the people that guy said would look for him," the barista explained, causing Scar to raise a brow. He surprised the villain by standing up and gesturing at the door a few feet away. "He left something for you."

Scar frowned, not quite understanding what that meant. "He… what?"

The situation suddenly grew much more complex, but he wasn't going to just hang around and not find out what the guy was saying. Lizzie and Jimmy helped Scar to his feet, and they were led back inside. The barista hadn't completely ceased his shaking, however, and the process of opening the door was delayed by his keys missing the slot several times.

Automatically, upon entering, there was a blast of warmth from the building's heat and some motion sensor lights switched on. It was a cramped kitchen area, with only enough space for a couple of people to prepare the collection of sweet treats they probably offered in the mornings. The barista led them to the counter with very little fanfare.

"I stashed these here in case you came by, but I was kinda planning on taking them to the cops," he explained, bending and retrieving something from the shelves under the register. "Y'know, in case they were, like, drugs or whatever."

Lizzie snorted, "If it's our friend, it's definitely not drugs."

“Not for humans, at least,” Jimmy added. The barista shot him a strange look, but evidently remained too scared of him to ask follow up questions.

Scar was handed a plastic bag, unassuming on the outside. When he opened it, though, the air was punched from his lungs.

Ingredients, he realized, *Everything Grian was supposed to buy.*

His head grew dizzy. His vision blurred. Scar’s world seemed to crumble underneath him as the full force of reality slammed down upon his shoulders. Jimmy caught Scar before he could tip, but it did not stop his mental descent.

This wasn’t a joke or some grand misunderstanding like they’d prayed it would be. Grian was gone — *missing.* They had no tracker, no clues, not even the name of the person that’d taken him. All that remained was this bag, which the doctor had handed over to the barista *knowing* that Scar would come looking.

And they’d failed him. *Scar* had failed him. Failed to answer the call, failed to read the text, failed to get there soon enough, he’d *failed him.*

“Oh, another thing! There was also a message,” the barista chimed again. Scar blinked, swallowing back his every emotion to hone in on the civilian across from him. “He wanted me to tell you that he was *‘going on a walk in the park,’* or something.”

The words washed over him. Their meaning rang in his soul from the very second they were spoken into existence. Scar’s heart jumped into

his throat, and he dropped the bag of ingredients. Lizzie was quick enough to catch them, but his attention was a distant thing.

All at once, he spun on his heels. His crutch clicked out a hurried rhythm as he rushed faster and faster towards the door. Scar couldn't hear the voices calling his name, didn't care that he was leaving abruptly. He had to get out, get away, get to *Grian.*

"Scar?"

Scar burst out into the cold air. His nose and cheeks burned, but he didn't feel it in the slightest. If any pain was to reach him, it was the squeezing of his heart as it was full to bursting with terror.

A walk in the park.

That connection was impossible to miss.

Morphling.

"Scar, come back!"

There were few outcomes that could be worse than Morphling being the hero to kidnap Grian. With the Gs' tedious morality on the line already when it came to their treatment of villains, who knew how they might react to a civilian they thought to be involved. They could be brash, violent, corrupt. Not only was Grian missing, but they could subject him to any number of things.

“Scar!” Jimmy grabbed his arm, stopping him. “Where are you going?”

“Let go,” Scar said, trying and failing to shrug him off. “I have to—“

“Do what?” Lizzie appeared on his other side, expression full of confusion and anger. “Grian isn’t here, Scar.”

“Yeah, but I need to…” Scar trailed off, blinking quickly to try and keep his mind clear. A fog had begun to build, like the kind that came after a long workout when every thought stole from his remaining stamina. “I have to find him. We have to hurry, Liz. The Gs, they *took* him.”

Lizzie froze, paling.

“Wait,” Jimmy said. He cast a look Lizzie’s way, but the majority of his worry was still focused on Scar. “The Gs?”

“That’s what Grian’s message meant,” Scar replied, nodding. “Please, guys. We have to get him back *now.”*

Lizzie and Jimmy had a silent conversation.

Scar couldn’t focus on them, thinking only of Grian. Was he scared when they took him? Did he put up a fight? Did he try to run? Which direction would they have taken him? Towards the Agency, or some other location? Was it just Morphling, or were the others there when it happened?

God, the idea of Blackhole or Daybreak getting ahold of Grian made nausea rise in the back of his throat. Teleportation and flight — he could be *anywhere.*

"What's wrong?" A new voice joined in as the barista ran after them. He looked worried and beyond out of his depth. "Did something bad happen? Should I call the cops?"

Jimmy and Lizzie straightened, shouting at the same time, "No!"

The civilian shrunk back. Scar could not return to his own head enough to attempt to smooth things over. He nudged Lizzie, and she begrudgingly stepped forward to do it for him.

"Thank you for helping us," she said, obviously trying for a softer tone. "This is a personal matter. Nothing serious. You're welcome to go about your business. You won't hear from us again."

The barista still seemed hesitant. "But—"

Jimmy's lips pulled up into a cruel snarl. "Go."

That was enough to send the man scrambling back the way he came. They were alone on that chilly sidewalk. No other civilians, no heroes, and certainly no Grian. Scar couldn't feel the tips of his fingers, numb from clutching onto the crutch far too tightly, and worsened by the whistling wind.

He gazed over at his teammates, his friends, the people that had been by his side through his worst moments, and all he could feel was an immense guilt. Grian should've been here too, but he wasn't, and it

was Scar's fault. He'd been the one to drag an innocent man into the mix. He'd been the one to get attached. He'd been the one to rely far too heavily on somebody who couldn't defend themselves. And now, Grian was paying the price for his greed.

"Scar," Jimmy whispered. "We'll find him. It'll be okay."

"I wasn't careful enough," Scar whispered, eyes stinging, though he refused to cry. What bubbled up inside of him wasn't sadness, but rather, something further akin to rage — at the heroes, at the world, but mostly at himself. "I warned both of you about dating with our profession, and then I did everything wrong."

"Oh, Scar," Lizzie shushed, brushing a hand over his cheek. Scar's heart broke at the sight of an old hollowness reopening in her own eyes, even as she tried to comfort him. "You're being too hard on yourself. You couldn't have known."

"Yeah! Plus, you did what you could to keep him safe. From the moment we met him, you were taking precautions that you never gave anyone else," Jimmy pointed out, leaning down so they were at eye level. "And you're not going to stop now."

Scar stared at his friends. Lizzie, made visibly uncomfortable from the mere mention of the Gs, and Jimmy, standing strong for the three of them even through his usually unserious personality. They were his sole anchors in the midst of this mess, unstable as they themselves could be. After years together, he knew they'd be by his side no matter what the world threw their way.

Scar straightened, taking a deep breath in. "Maybe, but we'll have to find him first. There's no telling where they've gone."

“We’ll find him,” Lizzie swore. “We’ll find him, and then we’ll make sure the *Gs* regret ever being born. Sound good?”

Scar allowed himself to hear her, nodding along. They were right in more than one way in that regard. As long as he drew breath, Grian would be alright. Grian would be saved. Grian would come back to him.

And the little *pests* that had brought this on would feel a new wrath, unlike any they’d encountered before.

His rage filtered into one specific flame, building behind his ribs until it scorched his heart with hatred.

Scar turned his gaze down to his hands. A red glow flickered around his knuckles, itching to be put to use. He wanted to feel bone breaking beneath his fist, blood dripping from their wounds, hearts pounding as he pushed them to their limit.

He wanted them *dead.*

Scar could hardly contain himself, the itch in his brain for violence and mayhem growing ever stronger. It was the itch he’d borne all his life, from the moment his powers first manifested within him, from the moment he realized that he’d never be able to outwardly express those same powers, lest he allow himself to bow down to the overlords at the Agency. The itch that would’ve, if given time, faded completely alongside his abilities had he not found an outlet for them quickly.

That itch was what differentiated him from the petty criminals. It was the flare that set him apart in the eyes of the public. It was the craving for excitement that made the media depict him as insane. It was the

willing moral corruption that put him into a league that he only shared with two others. It was what made him a *villain.*

And it was the same thing he'd been holding back, letting fester, working to dim since he'd entered into his dealings with Grian. No harming innocents, no needless destruction, no death without cause. He'd bent those rules on so few occasions as of late that he could still count each exception on one hand.

Bloodlust — that achingly familiar sensation — had not truly consumed him in quite a long time. Whenever it tried, he'd warded it off with visions of one smiling face behind his eyes. Grian wouldn't like to see him kill. Grian wouldn't enjoy reports of innocents as collateral. Grian wouldn't smile at him like that if Scar gave in.

A shame, then, that Grian wasn't there to rein him in anymore.

His grip tightened impossibly more on his crutch.

"We have to hurry," Scar told his Bamboozlers. "Or else I don't know what I'll do."

To absolutely no one's surprise, being launched into the air at intense speeds with no chance to prepare aside from a hero saying, *'Don't scream,'* was not a terribly pleasant experience. Grian had passed out from a combination of fear and blood rushing to his brain nearly the second they'd left the ground.

A fact that he was, presently, regretting.

The room around him was dark. Not the kind of dark that came with pitch blackness, nor the sultry blue of the midnight sky, but the sort of dark that tricked his eyes into believing they could see. Which was, actually, worse than all the other kinds combined.

Grian blinked rapidly, daring his eyes to focus on what almost seemed to be a figure in front of him. If he tilted his head, the collection of shadows almost seemed to form themselves into that of broad shoulders, or an outstretched hand. Occasionally, when he blinked, that figure seemed to move, shifting alongside him. However, if it was a person, they had not spoken or outwardly alerted him to their presence at any point.

Grian really wanted to write it off as a trick of the light – or the lack of light – but he couldn't rid himself of the horrible sensation that he was being watched. There was this shiver up his spine of something other than cold every few minutes, and it always led him back to that sort-of-silhouette, endlessly questionable.

He had, of course, already tried verbal communication. It was difficult due to the gag in his mouth. A tasteless, bothersome fabric had been tied around his head, keeping him from doing anything beyond shouting aimlessly. It didn't prove useful in furthering his observations.

This was a puzzle he'd been attempting to figure out for upwards of an hour. Although, it was possible it'd been longer than that. Time was tricky to figure out when his head was still spinning from liftoff, and there were no indications of the minutes passing anywhere around him. His watch had been taken when he was unconscious, alongside his phone and jacket. The loss of its weight on his arm was poignant and unpleasant.

Despite being so disconnected from the rest of the world, he *had*

discovered a singular method of timekeeping that, while not being the most stable, worked better than simply guessing. His hands, which were still cuffed together behind the back of whatever chair kept him captive, were able to maneuver the slightest bit to come into contact with one another. He couldn't get free, but utilizing them correctly, he found his method. It helped him maintain some sanity during the uncertainty of his situation.

Grian had latched onto his own pulse point on his wrist, counting out each beat of his heart. Given that he did not remember his own average BPM, and his heart rate liked to spike whenever he remembered that he was currently being held hostage by people that wanted his partner and friends dead, it wasn't foolproof. However, with some rough estimation, he had decided that every eighty-five beats was a minute passing.

Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three…

He thought the figure across from him shifted. His ears almost tricked him into hearing it. Then, he blinked, and its position went back to how he'd been seeing it for the past hour.

Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight…

Grian was thirsty. He wished he'd been given a chance to drink that hot chocolate earlier. His throat was scratchy from his past attempts at screaming.

Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five.

Roughly one more minute had passed since he'd begun to count, bringing his total estimate up to an hour and ten minutes. He started his count over with the next beat of his heart.

However, Grian was interrupted by the sound of metal screeching somewhere beyond his darkened room. The noise was loud in comparison to the silence that had plagued him before. He perked up, losing track of his pulse immediately as it began to hammer.

Then, blessedly, he saw *light*.

It came as an outline in front of him, snaking through what had to be the frame of a giant door. At the bottom, he saw shadows, and heard the shuffling of several pairs of footsteps.

Adrenaline soaring, Grian began to shout again. He fought against the bindings around his legs, torso, and wrists to try and move closer. It was no use. Luckily, though, these individuals seemed to be heading in his direction. Their footsteps drew closer, until he could also make out muffled conversation.

By the time the door swung open, he was hardly able to breathe. The flood of brightness blinded him, made worse as he heard a switch get flipped, and a spotlight whirred to life over his head. Spots clouded his vision, and blurs of bodies were all he could make out. Grian blinked rapidly, begging them to clear.

His excitement drained the second they did.

Five people stood in front of him. None of them were friendly.

The Gs stared down at their captive audience, each dressed in full hero attire, weapons in hand. Only the man in the middle was smiling.

“Hello, Grian,” Morphling hummed, a smug grin stretching over his face. “Glad to see you’re finally awake.”

Grian shrunk back, nails digging into his palms in an attempt not to let his terror show on his face. He’d never seen this many masked individuals in a room at once. It was overwhelming, a similar level to that of the bone-chilling horror that overtook him during his first interaction with the Bamboozlers.

Taking them in without trembling required him to be gradual, logistical. He forced himself to take a mental step back, dragging his eyes from the left to the right slowly.

Blackhole was the first in the lineup. His face was covered, as per usual, by a large purple visor. Whereas most heroes had either their mouth or their eyes showing, nothing of his features were left visible behind the technological glow. His outfit was relatively reserved otherwise, with a black leather jacket layered atop a yellow turtleneck, cargo pants, and combat boots.

His arms rested by his side, meaning both of his giant, metal gloves were visible. Grian hadn’t gotten a chance to see them in action often, unless he was specifically watching the news to check on his friends, but he’d certainly seen the aftereffects of them. Punches from those fists left welts instead of bruises, and often resulted in broken ribs.

The next person beside him was undoubtedly Necromancer. They were a visage of death, painted in flowing fabrics. Her hair was the brightest thing about her, pulled back into a long ponytail of curling red. A lacy veil cascaded down from her headband to cover her features, keeping their eyes completely blocked from view and growing more sheer as it continued down past her nose.

Their blouse was a black, ruffled thing. Grian noted that, interestingly, the news drones never picked up the fabric's iridescent hues that seemed to reflect a shining variety of colors. It reminded him of an oil spill, glistening with distorted rainbows. Her hands, from what he could glimpse of them, were covered in tattoos that gave the impression of seeing through her skin to the bones beneath.

Their bow was tucked onto their back beside its quiver. The vet was relieved that his angle didn't give him a good view of it, as the mere presence of the weapon that had poisoned Scar made him sick to his stomach.

Morphling was watching him intently from behind his own mask, appearance disturbingly familiar to Grian now. His staff crackled with its usual electricity, and his expression shone with his typical surety, like he knew everything going on in the heads of those around him. Daybreak was another face Grian recognized from personal – though recent – experience.

However intimidating the other four were, it was the final face on the end of their lineup that grabbed his attention more than any of them. Out of all of the Gs, he knew the least about their fifth member. It was rare to see the group fighting together, as the Agency often split them up for their patrols, so this man hadn't crossed his mind on too many occasions.

The plant-based hero, Terra, was a sight to behold. Instead of a typical fabric or metallic mask, the entire left side of this man's body looked as though it had been subsumed by the winding trunk of a tree. Craggly bark stretched from the bottom of his foot to the top of his head, where it blocked half of his face from view.

The features that remained uncovered were no less off-putting. One bright yellow eye gazed down at him, unblinking. It was punctuated by spirals of gold makeup around the edges. He was tall, with a sturdy, looming frame. He wore a skintight black shirt, emphasizing

the curves of his arms, and cargo pants.

If Grian wasn't scared before, this figure carried an aura of undeniable dread with him that none of his teammates could replicate. He did not have a weapon, as his powers alone were enough to keep him ahead during fights, and yet his attention was pointed enough to give the impression of a knife against Grian's throat.

"Oh dear," Morphling tutted, drawing Grian's eyes in his direction again. Even then, he could still feel Terra watching him. "Where are my manners? You couldn't possibly talk back with your mouth covered. Here, let me help you."

The hair on Grian's neck rose as Morphling stepped closer, removing the gag from his mouth. Immediately, his jaw clamped shut, tired and sore from being propped open. He refused to allow any relief to show on his expression, though. Same as he'd done with his terror, Grian focused all his energy on keeping it bottled inside, determined not to give these strangers the satisfaction of knowing anything about him.

"There we go," Morphling chuckled. "Feel better? I hope you haven't been too uncomfortable."

Grian didn't answer, but that wasn't out of stubbornness. He tried, and only broke down into a rasping fit of coughs. His throat was too dry to be of use. No witty comments or pleas for mercy could make it out.

"Oh, take pity on the poor boy," came an unfamiliar voice. The modulator transformed the words into something soft and hissing, reminiscent of a snake. Grian realized it was Necromancer when they took a step forward. "Get him some water. It's probably been hours since he last had any."

“I’ll do it,” said another, their modulator deepened to an almost comical degree. Judging by the direction of the noise, it’d come from Blackhole. Although the second Grian’s eyes landed upon him, the hero disappeared. Teleportation was an odd sight, like he’d witnessed a glitch in the known world. One moment, a man was standing there, the next, he was gone.

It wasn’t two more beats before he was back, clutching a small glass of water between his large, metallic fingers. Necromancer took it, approaching the vet. Grian wanted to lean back, to deny anything they might give him, but the sandpaper feel of his mouth had him relenting as soon as the rim was touched to his lips.

Embarrassing as it was to have someone holding his drink for him, he did not waste a single drop, not knowing when they’d next allow him such luxuries. They were heroes, so presumably they wouldn’t actually go out of their way to dehydrate an innocent civilian, but that came with a *heavy* unknown factor: How innocent was Grian in their eyes?

He hadn’t exactly been offered an option to come with them, and since he was still in handcuffs, there was no doubt that his situation wasn’t good. But was it unredeemable? Did they have solid proof he’d been aiding and abetting the city’s most wanted criminals? Or were they taking precautions here, and going off a hunch?

The line of Morphling’s mouth as Grian drank showed a growing impatience. More than likely, he was upset that his intended questioning had been interrupted by something so tedious. His impatience told the vet that he needed to get his story straight *now,* or else he might reveal something that would help the opposition.

Necromancer stepped back once the glass was empty. Grian did a quick scan of his surroundings. This was the first time he’d really thought to look, as the room had been too dark to truly observe earlier. There were no windows, or alternative exits apart from the one door. It was devoid of any large pieces of furniture, with the

exception of a sleeping bag rolled up in one corner. Nothing about it made him feel at ease.

"So, Grian," Morphling said, kneeling in front of the vet's chair. Grian recognized the body language as something meant to calm his nerves. The hero's posture was almost friendly, like he was attempting to create a space between them for the honest truth. It clashed too severely with the rough feeling of metal still digging into Grian's skin to have ever had a chance of working. "I bet you're wondering why we've brought you here today."

"Yes, actually." Grian kept his tone at a practiced level of calm. He imagined this was just another day from before he was totally adjusted to the Bamboozlers. Weird things were going to happen, and he was going to have to adjust quickly, or else the world would keep spinning without him. "I was wondering exactly that."

"Hm." Morphling clicked his tongue, eyes narrowing with displeasure. Obviously, he'd been counting on a larger reaction. Were Grian not so advanced with his skills of hiding his inner turbulence, he might've gotten his wish. "Well, it's like I said. We have a few questions, and you're just the guy to answer them for us."

"Questions?" Grian echoed, and the hero nodded. Without an ounce of hesitation, the vet blurted, "I want a lawyer."

The hero in front of him paused. Grian thought he saw his brow twitch, but his countenance had relaxed again in a matter of moments.

"Apologies, but that's not really how this works," Morphling said. "You've not been arrested. This is just some routine questioning."

“I don’t care,” Grian insisted. “I won’t speak without a lawyer present.”

Again, Morphling’s brow twitched. He recovered, and sucked in a breath. “A few months ago, you were seen wandering around during a criminal activity warning, were you not?”

Grian scowled at the line of questioning. He’d expected it to go that way, and it furthered his motivation to stay quiet. Instead of giving so much as an acknowledgment that the other had spoken, Grian simply closed his mouth and did not reopen it.

This seemed to genuinely stump his interviewer. Morphling cast a glance back at the rest of his team, mouthing something that couldn’t be seen from Grian’s angle. Necromancer shook her head, and Daybreak rolled her eyes.

“You’re being too nice, in my opinion,” Daybreak sighed. “Here, step aside and let *me* try my hand.”

Grian’s confidence fled the second he saw the glint of a blade. Daybreak approached, Morphling giving her the space to lean down to the vet’s level. His heart catapulted into his throat as she raised her forearm, the hooked tip of her weapon grazing the skin of his neck and hesitating there.

“Listen up, dude,” she hissed. “You’re assuming yourself to have far more rights in place than you actually do. There will be no lawyers, no due process, no legal protections. For as long as we’re around, consider us judge, jury, and executioner.”

Grian gaped at her. He attempted to swallow, but that just made the blade dig further in. He saw the spark of intent in her eye. It reminded

him of one he'd seen in his kitchen ages ago — except there was no pot of tea or easily-convinced villain around to ebb the tension.

This threat was not empty. Daybreak wanted to kill him.

"I don't," Grian stammered, head spinning. "I don't understand."

"There's nothing *for* you to understand, criminal," Daybreak retorted. "It's exactly what it sounds like. Either you answer us, or you pay the price."

Grian scoffed against his better judgement, amazed. "That *can't* be legal. Surely the Agency doesn't want you—"

"The Agency doesn't control us," Daybreak said. Her arm pressed just the tiniest bit closer, breaking skin. Grian winced, terribly aware of the warmth of his blood dripping out onto the cold of her blade. "And they never will again."

The last little puzzle piece clicked into place in Grian's mind with that declaration. He understood, then, why he'd been kidnapped without due process, why he'd been hidden in some obscure location, why he'd been tortured by stifling darkness for untold amounts of time, why they could do all of this to him without fear.

They weren't acting on Agency orders.

They were working *alone*.

Grian was at the mercy of five rogue superheroes, no legal systems around to keep them in check. They were able to question him, torture him, kill him without anyone knowing.

God , Grian was going to *die*.

“Now,” Daybreak said, leaning back and smiling beneath her mask. An unnerving joy had coated her countenance in that split second. “I think we should proceed with our regular questioning. Don’t you?”

For the first time in a very long while, Grian’s mind was silent. He couldn’t think of a witty retort, or contrary comment. This wasn’t some game between himself and one of the Bamboozlers where they tossed harmless threats at him — his life was on the line.

He gave one quick nod, not sure what else to do. Grian could feel himself shaking. Any hope for nonchalance, feigned or otherwise, had been stripped from him.

“Good.”

Morphling stepped between them, blocking the scarlet hero from view. He wasn’t a welcome sight, but he wasn’t actively brandishing a blade with an unchecked level of bloodlust.

“So, about my earlier curiosities,” he began. “The first time we met, you were out during a criminal activity warning, were you not?”

Grian nodded. He couldn’t bring himself to lie.

“Very good, very good,” Morphling patronized. “We’ll move on. That evening, you were with a man whom you claimed was your boyfriend. Was he actually your boyfriend?”

Without thinking too closely, Grian nodded again. Although, it occurred to him the second it was done that he’d technically just lied. Back then, he hadn’t known Scar reciprocated his feelings, meaning they weren’t actively dating.

He willed himself not to flinch, or give it away. There was a chance he’d seemed sincere enough that they’d believe him. Grian held his breath, trying to remain optimistic. Morphling’s face didn’t change from his otherwise smug expression. He gave no indication of displeasure.

That’s why the vet wasn’t expecting a fist to slam into his gut at full-force.

Grian coughed and sputtered, an uncomfortable agony starting in his stomach from the feeling of knuckles against tender skin. He heaved for air, lungs emptied from the blow. Morphling straightened, clenching and unclenching his hand repeatedly whilst sighing, “How disappointing.”

“What–?” Grian gasped, “Why did you *do* that?”

“Ah, it seems you aren’t up to speed yet. I actually already knew the answer to that question,” Morphling said, tilting his head to one side. “I know a lot more than you might expect. All thanks to this lovely man, of course.”

A piece of paper was removed from his back pocket. Once it was unfolded and turned around, Grian saw a picture of a familiar face

staring back at him. Sporting his usual curled mustache, blue scrubs, and neatly combed hair, framed in the scenery of their clinic lobby, was Mumbo.

Grian blanched.

“You see, a good hero always investigates their suspects, even if they seem to have airtight alibis,” Morphling elaborated. “And it’s a good thing I did. Your coworker wasn’t too keen to tell me anything, but a little persuasion from my friend here, and he was more than happy to reveal it all.”

Necromancer gave a curt nod.

“He informed me that you do, in fact, work together, but that your truths stopped there,” Morphling went on. Each word felt like the stabbing of a shovel into dirt, digging the hole beneath Grian’s feet deeper and deeper. “Not only had you left work several hours prior, but you’ve also apparently never expressed interest in having a romantic partner after becoming a veterinarian.”

Grian’s vision swam, bile rising in his throat. He swallowed hard, repressing his horror as best he could.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Grian heard himself whispering, desperately confused. “You must be lying. Mumbo would’ve told me if heroes showed up at work and asked about me.”

“A trick of the trade, love,” Necromancer said. “All I have to do is suggest he think of the interaction as something unremarkable, and then it’s as good as gone from his memories. It works especially well on nervous vets trying to get out of conversations as quickly as possible. He never stood a chance.”

Grian wanted to pass out.

He couldn't see a way around this. Even if he attempted to cover for himself by saying that he'd been hiding his relationship from Mumbo, that didn't excuse him from not being scheduled like he had claimed. Grian had been caught.

"Now, we know enough about the Bamboozlers to be certain that *you* are not one of them," Morphling continued, voice barely audible over the ringing in Grian's ears. "Your build is too average, and your height doesn't match either Boogeyman or Ringmaster. However, your *associate* from that night was a much closer match, wouldn't you agree?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Grian couldn't have responded even if it weren't. His tongue was numb, throat dry again, though not from thirst. Morphling was perfectly content to keep speaking.

"Funnily enough, despite extensive searching, your friend's name is not something I have been able to find. The townhouse you were seen entering is not registered as being owned by any one individual, and no banks anywhere in the city have the rights to repossess it – almost as if the proper documentation has been stolen."

The vet hardly processed any of that. He knew nothing of the details of Scar's home, but it made sense that his civilian identity would exist as little as possible in the city's system. The other two Bamboozlers would probably have done the same thing for their houses. It wasn't a question to which he'd ever given much thought.

He had a feeling he would regret that now.

A staff was raised, an electric hum radiating from it as it hovered not two inches away from Grian's upper arm. A brief shock from it in that area wasn't likely to be fatal, but it would absolutely be painful.

"Tell me the name of your friend," Morphling said. "Tell us the name of the man we know as Ringmaster."

There it was – the dreaded question.

All those that'd come before it were preamble, simply a gateway for them to discuss this subject matter. They'd been building to this with their threats and their violent actions. They believed that he, an otherwise unexceptional civilian, would commit to giving them the truth after minimal pressure was applied.

With blood still dripping from the shallow cut on his throat, his lungs still heaving from their sudden bruising, and another weapon mere inches from bringing on more pain, they expected him to betray Scar.

Grian glanced down at the rippling waves of electricity. The staff sparked and crackled similarly to a cattle prod. Two years ago, he'd treated a stray dog that had been badly shocked by one of those. The poor thing suffered from burns on the skin, muscle spasms, and was never able to mentally recover. It became more aggressive, with little control over its right hind leg, nearest the initial wound.

He wondered what those burns would look like on his own skin. He wondered if his arm would spasm, if his mind would revolt, if his nerves would ever recover from the damage. He wondered if there would be anyone to tend to his wounds after this. He wondered if there would be an *after*.

"I don't know," Grian whispered.

Morphling tutted. “Wrong answer.”

The staff connected with his skin. Immediately a firecracker of agony shot up Grian’s arm, causing him to thrash against his bindings. He saw stars, a scream ripping from his chest. His hair stood on end, muscles fighting to get away, blood curdling in his veins.

Then, it stopped.

He gasped, coughing and half-slumped over. The taste of iron and ozone occupied his mouth, a new cut forming from where he’d bitten his tongue. A fatigue like no other set in, stealing every ounce of energy he had left.

“What is his name?” Grian’s head lulled to the side just enough to allow him to get a glimpse of Morphling’s frown. “Say it quickly, now.”

The buzzing staff still hovered dangerously near.

“I don’t know it,” Grian spat, sneering with all the anger he could muster. “I’m not lying.”

“Don’t play dumb,” Daybreak barked from over Morphling’s shoulder. He leveled her with the same amount of hatred.

“I’m serious. He didn’t tell me in case of incidents like these,” he insisted. “You’ve checked my phone, haven’t you? His contact isn’t even saved with a name, and none of the texts I’ve sent have used it

either.”

Morphling raised a brow, turning to look over his shoulder. Grian’s vision was blurry, but he thought he saw Blackhole give a small shrug. It was confirmed a moment later when the other man said, “I scanned over what I could, but I had to destroy the phone pretty soon after getting it to dispose of its tracker. Same with the watch.”

Grian sucked in a breath, heart picking up the slightest bit.

A tracker, his mind mused, hesitating somewhere between hysterical and distraught. *Leave it to Scar to have tricks like that up his sleeve even this late in the game.*

“And was there a name in the messages at all?”

“Not from what I could see,” Blackhole sighed. “But that doesn’t mean he’s telling the truth. We knew he was… *close* with the suspects. I doubt they would’ve kept that information from him for as long as they’ve known him.”

Inadvertently, Grian echoed, “As long as they’ve known me?”

He regretted speaking as soon as the words left his lips, since it gave his kidnappers another thing to hold over his head. Morphling seemed beyond happy to do so, smiling again.

“Yes, that’s right,” the hero laughed. “We didn’t know who exactly you were to the Bamboozlers until that night in the park, but we’ve known they had a professional behind the scenes from the moment you started.”

Grian huffed. “Did you now?”

“Obviously,” Daybreak cut in. “We’re not stupid. How else would a villain remove an arrow from his side in only a few minutes and sustain such a minor amount of damage that he was good to fight again a couple of days later?”

“The Agency’s been speculating about you for a very long time,” Necromancer agreed. Beneath their veil, Grian saw a smile that matched Morphling’s in irritating smugness. “Unluckily for you, we were one step ahead of them.”

“Right. The Agency probably would’ve stopped after only a bit of questioning. We have more in store for you, my unfortunate little friend.” Morphling raised a hand to cup Grian’s cheek. “But you could convince us to spare you the agony. Tell us Ringmaster’s civilian name, and everything will get a lot easier for the both of us.”

Grian narrowed his eyes and pulled away from the touch. Through gritted teeth, he reiterated what he’d already told them twice before, “I don’t *know.”*

Morphling sighed, and the pain returned all at once.

This time, though, Grian was worn out. The shockwaves were more than he could handle, stinging and sharp. He screamed until he felt raw inside, shivering in pain, and lost consciousness.

The evening was silent. No cars, nor babbling civilians passed near that section of occupied space. Abandoned warehouses stood like monoliths to a time long before the city's current state of economic boom, built to house products no longer manufactured.

These giants were scarcely utilized, practically forgotten for the more modern industrial sector not a mile further down. Most were fenced off these days, caution signs posted to warn trespassers about mold spores, shaky foundations, and the like. They were, simply put, the perfect place within which to store someone that needed to stay hidden.

The air shimmered, and a trained ear might've been able to catch the falling of light footsteps. A being lost to the naked eye stepped up to the last warehouse amongst a spanning row. His grappling hook — made invisible by his touch — was raised and fired towards the uneven roofing. Its veil of transparency was shattered as it rocketed out of his range, but if he worked fast enough, that wouldn't matter.

Jimmy was careful as he allowed himself to be lifted. This building was in bad condition, an unlikely choice, but his mind would not let him be until every last one was checked. The skylights had been his method of subtle observation for the past dozen warehouses, and they would be for this one as well. The doors were often rusted shut, or too creaky to be valid for someone attempting to scout an area unnoticed.

Now, stepping atop shaky metal roofs wasn't necessarily *better* for a person prioritizing stealth, but at least it was more likely to be written off. Jimmy had certainly seen plenty of large birds and possums scampering around the vicinity after nightfall. They were an easy thing to blame.

Jimmy made it to the skylight with little trouble. The roof, expectedly, groaned under his weight as he knelt and used his sleeve to wipe away a large layer of grime. The dust tickled his nose, but he pushed through without much of a thought. Many missions before had put

him in worse positions — musty back rooms, or tight spaces that hadn't seen a vacuum in their entire lives, anything for the sake of information. And this one, he might argue, was the most important of all.

He peered through the glass, but it wasn't quite enough to make out anything significant. This too had happened to him at every other abandoned warehouse he visited. He kept hoping that one might be easy enough to let him go without putting in too much effort, but that had not been the case. Jimmy cracked his knuckles, removed the screwdriver from his pocket, and began the irritating process of removing the skylight entirely.

It took a long while to get every single screw out, but he did finally manage. Jimmy carefully shoved down on the glass, causing it to jerk inwards. However, with a singular swift movement, he caught the edges, lifting it back up and out of the way before it could fall.

Carefully, the villain tossed his grappling hook over the other side of the roof. It hooked on the lip on the first attempt, made possible by years of practice with the device. After checking that it was secure enough to hold him, he assured his grip on the handle was firm, and gently descended into the warehouse.

It was dark, aside from the beams of moonlight sneaking through the weakened bits of the ceiling overhead. He didn't see much, didn't hear much. Dust permeated the air, thick enough to keep the expanse around him dangerously hidden. At the very least, with a solid mix of his powers and that natural screen, he knew he would be nearly impossible to spot.

Once he was low enough, Jimmy paused to listen. Nothing was immediately obvious, so he brought his thumb and forefinger up to his lips. A sharp whistle echoed out around him, bouncing off the ceiling, the floor, the walls, and returning back to him uninterrupted.

Empty.

Great.

He knew what the pitch sounded like in a warehouse full of crates, or abandoned machinery, and this was not it. If anything occupied this one, then those objects were too small to warrant a response. That meant this was as much of a bust as all the others he'd checked before this.

Frustrated, he groaned, listening to his own voice bounce back at him. A whole night had been wasted searching this grouping of abandoned buildings, certain there was bound to be *something* significant hidden within, but he was out of luck. No leads, no sign of his kidnapped friend, and now he was supremely tired for nothing.

Jimmy pressed the button on his grappling hook to bring himself back up and listened to the whirring start. It began to retract, raising him at an annoyingly slow pace. He was patient, though, aware that it wasn't good to get testy with his technology. The rope, at least, was industrial strength and designed to carry his weight, no matter how long it insisted on taking.

Then, he heard a concerning groan shiver against the walls of the building – a noise for which he was *not* responsible. A moment later, the grappling hook jerked, nearly causing him to lose his grip. His slow rising was brought to a grinding halt as a metallic scraping sound seemed to envelope the space around him.

Jimmy's stomach dropped.

“No, no, *no,”* he cursed, head whipping around to stare at the unstable walls of the building around him. “C’mon! Don’t collapse on me now!”

Jimmy’s gaze landed on the ceiling immediately above him. It was bending inward with each passing moment. He knew what that meant even through the cloud of dust around his eyes.

If he couldn’t get out of this situation soon, the whole place was going to cave in while he was inside of it.

Thinking quickly, Jimmy glanced around. His unclear vision made it too hard to see if there were any strategic spots upon which he could land, or beams that could at least break his fall a little bit. He was out of luck there.

Considering his secondary options, his chances of escaping unscathed seemed to drop further. A fall from this height would result in a broken bone without a doubt, and climbing the rope of his grappling hook would put more pressure on the already-agitated roof. He had no visible way to save himself.

Only one option truly remained.

Jimmy raised his watch to his mouth, using his chin to press the button on the side to switch it to call mode. From there, his earpiece came to life, a robotic voice saying, *“Who would you like to call?”*

He pressed the arrow button on the side to scroll through his options. As he went, each name was read out to him by the same voice.

“Ringmaster.”

Scar was out of the question. Grian had been missing for several days, and the guy hadn't slept a wink. On top of his already frail condition, he wouldn't be able to do anything for Jimmy right now.

"Eclipse."

Lizzie was doing scouting of her own. Reconnaissance on the other side of town — also not useful to him. He knew who he was actually going to call before he'd even reached the contact name.

"Zip."

Jimmy selected that contact by double tapping his earpiece. No one else truly made sense. The system gave him a brief verbal warning.

"Alert: User 'Zip' is not available via their earpiece. Switching to the provided phone number instead."

Jimmy listened to the ringing of a dial tone in his ears. He gritted his teeth against the strain that was slowly overtaking his arm. Stealth missions were not new to him, given his role within the villain group. Because of that, he had pretty solid upper body strength, but hesitating for this long just with his grip strength alone was getting ridiculous. Dangling above empty space was something he, unsurprisingly, tried to *avoid* doing.

He couldn't even stay invisible anymore if he wanted to conserve what stamina he had left. Jimmy was suddenly glad to be the sole person in that dreaded warehouse. Finally, the ringing stopped, being interrupted by a familiar voice saying, *"Hello?"*

“Tango,” Jimmy gasped. “Listen, hey, are you busy right now?”

“Oh! Jimmy, hey,” Tango replied, tone rising in pitch as he realized who he was speaking to. Jimmy heard shuffling in the background, like he’d been in bed and was sitting up. He distinctly did not have time to imagine that scene. *“I’m not busy, no. What’s up, man?”*

“I’m in a bit of a predicament, and I think you might be the only one who can get here in time,” Jimmy explained. He gently moved to adjust his grip, trying to make it slightly more secure, but then the roof was groaning again, and he was jerked downward again. It was almost enough to dislodge his hand completely.

He must’ve given a bit of a reactionary shriek, because Tango was suddenly blurting over the phone, *“Jimmy? Are you okay? Where are you? How can I help?”*

“Tango,” Jimmy said through clenched teeth. The muscles in his abdomen were tight, screaming at him. Speaking was difficult as he expended most of his energy on staying up. “Abandoned industrial sector. Last warehouse on the row. Inside. Hurry!”

Tango did not respond. Jimmy heard the line go dead and focused everything he had on keeping his grip strong. In another world, one where he wasn’t still recovering from a broken finger, he’d switch to his other hand, lessen some of the strain. However, Jimmy wasn’t in a position to do that at the moment.

The roof jerked downwards once more, and he cried out, pain shooting through him. Another burst like that might dislocate his shoulder. The metallic screeching grew unbearable, and a few feet over from him, he watched as a piece of the roof gave up its feeble

attempt to remain sturdy. It crashed into the ground below, shooting up a pillar of disrupted dust into the air.

He coughed, suddenly blinded. Jimmy wiped at his eyes, but the quick movements made the rope from which he dangled swing. As soon as his vision was cleared, he watched another tile fall — further from him, but it caused the ground to rumble all the same. That small disruption, that one quiver against the building's foundation, was enough to kickstart the process already slowly at work.

Suddenly, occasional groans and a couple of stray falling panels were the least of his worries. The major cave-in had begun. The entire warehouse shook with a teeth-chattering force. Roofing collapsed around him in rapid succession. Jimmy hooked his ankles to keep his legs from involuntarily kicking, but it did little to improve his situation. He just needed *time*.

A ceiling tile near where his grappling hook remained firmly attached was the next to fling itself down into the abyssal darkness of the lower warehouse. Jimmy heard the metal screech above him, and knew what was to come. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself. He was ready when his grappling hook jerked one last time, and then was ripped free of its support.

Freefall overtook him instantly, his stomach rising into his throat and a scream ripping out of him. The world whistled past him as he plummeted. Weightlessness traveled from the base of his spine to the dizzying recesses of his mind, encapsulating his very soul. Jimmy waited for the ground, waited for the sudden slam, and an even more sudden end.

When his fall finally met that end, however, it did not feel like the extinguishing of a life.

He'd anticipated a hard hit, a reverberating shatter through each of his bones. What he felt instead was closer to the sensation of being tackled. There was fabric, a tangle of limbs, and a scream from a voice beyond his own. In the midst of it, he felt hands on his lower back and under his legs.

Jimmy's eyes flew open just in time to catch a flash of a familiar face, and then he was getting pulled tightly against a heaving chest. He didn't need much more than that to understand what was going on.

Tango was here!

"Jimmy, hold on," came the lovely, raspy voice of his companion. It was nearly inaudible in the deafening roar of the environment around them, but Jimmy would never miss that sound, not if he could help it. "This whole place is coming down! I'm gonna get us out."

The arms surrounding his body clutched him closer to a lean chest, and the unmistakable sudden vertigo of superspeed overcame him. Jimmy's stomach lurched, his limbs pulling backwards, his mind spinning in endless circles.

Without warning, a loud *bang* echoed around the space, and lights appeared beyond his eyelids. The speeding sensation stopped, jerking into whirling stillness in half a second. He was expectedly disoriented, but it wasn't an abnormal feeling. This was always the after-effect of being dragged along by Tango's power.

"It's safe now, Jimmy. You're safe."

Jimmy pulled back, blinking rapidly to let his vision refocus. He saw two faces, then three, then two again, and finally, one solid Tango leaning over him. Glinting eyes, spiky hair, and stubble lining a soft

jaw. After a near-death experience, there wasn't a single person he'd rather see more.

"You got here right on time," Jimmy said, smiling through his haze. "Thank goodness."

"I'm always on time," Tango said, chest puffed up with pride. He was still wearing his pajamas, just an oversized shirt and fuzzy christmas-patterned pants. "I would've been faster, but *someone* didn't tell me if the 'last warehouse on the row' was referring to the north or south side, so I had to check both."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, hitting Tango lightly. "You were plenty fast. That's just what I needed you to be."

"Really? Is my superpower all I'm good for?" Tango feigned hurt, though his grin didn't dampen in the least. The topic switched as he took in the sight of Jimmy's clothing — all black to help him blend in while he was too tired for invisibility. "Another stealth mission?"

Jimmy sighed, begrudgingly letting his gaze leave his companion just long enough to take in his new surroundings. The warehouse was a sorry sight to behold. Calling it a building would be generous. A skeletal frame remained in some areas, but it was mostly just a pile of rubble, barely more than a memory. Dust and debris permeated the air in the form of a thick cloud, the winds quick to take it away once it reached a certain height.

Anyone caught beneath such a devastating collapse would've been crushed without a doubt. Tango had indeed arrived right on time, moments before the worst of it came toppling down. A gruesome grave could've awaited him otherwise, nobody for miles to help dig him out, debris invading his lungs, and no doctor to help him even if he did miraculously get out alive.

He repressed a shiver, opting to focus on much less depressing details of his current situation – like the fact that he was still cradled in Tango's arms, tucked against his chest like he was as light as a feather. Given the firm definition of the other's muscles, that might well have been the case.

"Yeah, it was supposed to be," Jimmy grumbled. He let his head lull back, confident that a change in weight distribution would not disrupt his valiant knight's hold. "So much for sneaking around. I think the whole world knows I'm here now."

They were standing a little ways away from the demolished building, nearer to one of the other warehouses on that street. The distance kept the majority of the wind from their eyes, as it had taken to blowing the cloud of dust around with a fury now. They were both still covered in a thin layer of crushed powder, desperately in need of a change.

"Maybe a little bit," Tango admitted. "What were you scopin' out?"

Jimmy nodded towards the lane of identical structures. "I've checked every one of these for signs of the heroes, but there wasn't anything useful."

Tango whistled, raising a brow. "Yeesh, that's a lot. Have you been here all day?"

"Nah, just a few hours," Jimmy replied. "You're not the only one who can move quickly when you want to."

"It's these lovely long legs of yours," Tango laughed. "What were you

looking for?"

"Not what," he sighed, crossing his arms. *"Who.* We still haven't found our doctor."

"Ah, the ever-elusive doctor." Tango clicked his tongue and shook his head. "I'd help you search, but you and your Bamboozlers *still* refuse to reveal anything about him."

"Sorry, big guy," Jimmy said, patting his roommate's chest. They'd had this back and forth a great many times. "Even though we're on good terms with your little band of merry men, we're not very keen on sharing."

Tango had indeed heard about Grian before. It was hard for Jimmy to keep secrets from the man that he spent all of his free time around. Unfortunately for Tango, he was, first and foremost, a Bamboozler. When Grian had officially become their personal doctor, the three of them had sat down and explicitly decided not to tell anyone else about him. Mentions of a doctor were fine — the other two understood Jimmy's plight — but specifics were forbidden.

Scar especially had not been fond of the idea of other villains bothering his little boyfriend, even before they were officially dating. Tango didn't know Grian's name, what he looked like, where he lived, nor the type of medical professional that he was. He only knew that the Bamboozlers could tank some of the worst injuries possible, and come out alright in the end, all thanks to that same mysterious doctor.

However, their precautions had created quite a few new problems now that they'd lost him. They couldn't outsource the work of looking without risking the other groups wanting in on their arrangement. Should they ask for assistance from the Tuff Guys in locating their friend, it would inevitably mean they *owed* the trio if Grian was

found.

A favor to a villain was a powerful thing. Even Scar would have a hard time ignoring one being cashed in. To do so would have the potential to start a feud between villain groups, and that would never end well for either of them. It was better to avoid such a thing being brought into existence at all.

The Tuff Guys would be especially unbearable with a token like that. Jimmy could already imagine Bdubs staring at them through those huge eyes of his, gripping onto Etho's arm like he was wont to do whenever they were together, and declaring, *"Well,* we *helped you find him, so* we *should be allowed to borrow him for a bit!"*

Grian would be traded like a commodity. The Tuff Guys wouldn't *mean* it like that, but it would be what happened. So, they couldn't ask for help here, and they couldn't reveal anything else. For all it pained Jimmy to keep secrets from Tango, it would pain him more if he let an innocent civilian get mixed up in their politics.

Grian was already enduring more than he was ever supposed to at the hands of the heroes. They could be torturing him, starving him, keeping him cold and alone and scared. An average civilian wouldn't be used to that sort of cruelty. None of the Bamboozlers would admit it, but they all knew that there was a possibility their doctor might want out of their arrangement after this mess.

Damn heroes, ruining a good thing.

"I get it, Jim," Tango sighed. "I really do hope you find him. He's saved us both from a ton of trouble in the past."

Jimmy raised a brow, tipping his head to the side. "What's that

supposed to mean?"

"Nothing bad," Tango said. "Just that he's patched you up every time you've gotten hurt for months now, and I'm not sure if you remember, but that used to be *my* job."

Jimmy flushed, face so hot that he feared he might burst into flames.

Of course he remembered that.

The image of Tango fretting over him with bandages and medicine and that adorable furrow in his brow was one ingrained in his memories. It was why he wasn't surprised when Scar developed feelings for their little doctor rather quickly — receiving care from someone simply out of the goodness of their heart, especially as a villain so used to their very presence being met with violence, was intoxicating.

That was one of the reasons why Grian had annoyed Jimmy at first. Scar was never the type to be easily shaken before the vet arrived. Lizzie had her hero, and Jimmy, his roommate, but Scar remained stoic and distant. He appeared only to love his pets and his teammates. There was never a circumstance in which he'd waver, or fail in his duties.

Then, without warning, he suddenly had a million weaknesses, and they all originated from that singular man.

Scar was stepping in front of their blades to spare a random stranger in an alleyway. Scar was coming home without the medical tools he'd set out to retrieve. Scar was being whisked away from battles to apartments that didn't belong to them. Scar was bringing Lizzie to a stranger during their lowest moment by far — a moment that tested

their trust in each other as much as it tested the civilian they'd just met.

And throughout it all, Scar was completely taken by Grian. He developed a bond with him, delighted in his oddities, longed to see him even when he wasn't hurting. It was a familiar sight to Jimmy. He felt the same way about his roommate.

"Personally, as much as I *loved* tending to your every need," Tango continued, squeezing him a bit in amusement. "I felt a lot better knowing there was a professional looking after you."

It was impossible not to warm at the smile on his companion's face, the genuine fondness in his eyes. Jimmy wished the circumstances for such a conversation were better. "We'll get him back, man," he said, as sure as he could let himself be. "We have to."

"You will," Tango agreed, nodding towards the rubble. "Even if you have to bring the whole city down to do it."

Jimmy laughed, but it sounded breathier than he'd intended, not quite amused.

Tango would be more hesitant to make jokes like *that* if he'd seen their planning board recently.

He opened his mouth to comment on Scar's obsessive searching, but his words were drowned out as sirens roared to life somewhere not far from them. Both of them whipped around to face the sound, seeing the flashing blues and reds bouncing off the wall of a building down the street. It was going to come around the corner any minute now.

But Jimmy could feel the rise and fall of his companion's chest. Tango had pushed himself to get here on time, and in doing so, was significantly more tired than he would be normally. It'd take a minute for his powers to recover again, especially when he was dragging along extra weight. They couldn't outrun these cops, and there were very few places to hide along the street.

"Tango," Jimmy said, making up his mind. "Put me down and be quiet."

Tango frowned, but set Jimmy on his own two feet without complaining.

The ground was shaky beneath him, his legs still unstable from his fall. Despite that, Jimmy willed himself to have more control. He shook out his remaining unease in favor of externalizing the permanent well of power that flowed through his veins. The police sirens were growing nearer. He took his roommate's hands in his, and closed his eyes.

He let the featherlight breeze of his powers consume him, whisking his body away from regular visibility — so practiced that he hardly noticed the waves of static that swept up and around his limbs. It was exhilarating, perfect, almost relaxing to feel the swell as it encapsulated him.

Unfortunately, Tango's hands in his were disruptive to that flow of energy, as contact from another organic being often was. It was like hitting a wall in his own senses. Inorganic things that came into contact with him, such as clothing or weapons, would simply be subsumed without much issue. This touch, however, felt like an opposing force. It actively pushed against him, meeting the energy and shredding it.

Tango stopped the waves from creating a consistent field of nothingness around him, jarring and breaking their rhythm with each point of contact. If it was allowed to continue, it would inevitably cause Jimmy to fall out of his state of invisibility.

There were bound to be exact scientific terms for all of that — for what it meant to possess abilities such as these, why their limitations only applied to living beings and not objects — but anyone proficient enough in the study of powers to answer those questions *also* had the Agency on speed dial. And for people like him, that was enough to avoid exploring further.

Besides, he'd controlled his own powers long enough to know all the ways around his problems, even if they weren't long-term solutions.

Before Tango's hold on him could become too much of a distraction, rupturing the already-fragile cover of his abilities, Jimmy let them expand. It was difficult to get through the initial wall, but once he'd broken it down, forcing his way further in was not hard. He felt the buzzing begin to creep up his friend's hands, from the tips of his fingers and further to his wrists, eventually engulfing the whole of his arms.

Tango drew in an audible breath, shivering a little at the sensation. Still, Jimmy didn't open his eyes.

His mind carried on, dragging its blanket of electricity higher over the both of them. It was snug, strained further than Jimmy usually let it go, but it fit. He knew, even though he couldn't look, that no outside observer would be able to distinguish them from their surroundings. They were perfectly invisible.

"Oh my God," Tango whispered. Jimmy's focus wavered at the sound of his voice, and he felt the physical ripple through the veil. "This is so

cool. I can't see my own arms or anything!"

"Tango, be quiet," Jimmy gritted, though speaking also disrupted their cover. He had to take a breath to revitalize it, which sapped energy at a much higher rate than it would've if he'd just been caring for himself. He couldn't let go yet. The sirens were loud. If he had to guess, they'd turned down the street and were almost upon them. To drop their cover now would mean being spotted.

"Right, right, my bad," Tango said. Jimmy squeezed him harder, brows furrowing with the effort it took to get through even those small distractions. Then, as Tango obviously failed to grasp the full severity of the situation, he whispered, "Total silence coming right up, dude. Don't you even worry!"

Fed up and at risk of cracking completely, Jimmy threw caution to the wind. He opened his eyes and shoved Tango back against the wall of the warehouse behind them. A hand clamped over his mouth too for good measure, keeping him quiet as well as continuing the contact necessary for the veil to stay in place. By some miracle, it was still holding on.

He couldn't see Tango's expression through the invisibility — had honestly just relied on muscle memory to find his mouth moments prior — but he could hear the way his breath had hitched. With their chests pressed together, Jimmy could feel how it ceased to come altogether for several long seconds. When finally Tango did breathe again, it fanned out shakily along the back of Jimmy's hand.

But neither could analyze that for long. The sirens were upon them, and with that noise came a singular cop car.

Though it was a bit harder with open eyes, Jimmy held onto his powers as the police pulled up to inspect the building. There was

muffled chatter inside the car, and the beeping of a radio as the damage was clearly reported. Notably, however, they didn't get out of their vehicle, didn't check for bodies, didn't even come to a full stop. Jimmy couldn't say he was surprised.

It wasn't a secret that these places were all in disrepair and abandoned. The authorities wouldn't expect to find anyone buried beneath the rubble. They wouldn't consider it worth a closer look. Jimmy didn't let himself imagine what would've happened had he not been able to call upon Tango — the hours he would've spent without assistance, stuck under the rocks, assuming he'd even survived the initial collapse.

Tango did, to his credit, stay very silent for the duration of the time the police were there. Jimmy couldn't see his face or lend much mental attention towards anything besides keeping his powers intact, but his friend had definitely recognized the severity of the situation.

Through their open windows, the cops' conversation could be heard. It was nothing unusual or concerning, but Jimmy listened anyway. He was used to staying alert for helpful information, especially on stealth missions.

"What do you think caused it?" The cop behind the wheel spoke in a low voice, obviously unsure.

His colleague was older, less worried about such matters. There was a coffee clutched in his hands. "Coulda been anything. These ole things are all waitin' to come toppling down."

"Yeah, but so suddenly?" The younger man slowed, though still, they didn't stop driving completely. "Should we be worried about — I don't know — criminals? Seems like a pretty suspicious location."

“Nah, not worth our time,” said his elder. “Besides, the Agency sends their guys to do routine checks of places like these all the time in case a villain decides to set up shop here. They woulda found them by now.”

Jimmy already knew that. It was why they’d constructed their bunker so deep under the ground in an inconspicuous location. Abandoned buildings were only options considered by amateurs who didn’t understand their enemies. The heroes were a lot of things, but they weren’t dumb, and they weren’t lazy. They would absolutely check a location dozens of times every month just to be certain no villains were basing within it.

True villains, those with the intent to stick around, didn’t waste energy on places as lame as that. All it took was robbing the right bank, finding the right spot, using the right civilian alias, and giving the right excuse to a team of professionals as to why a basement needed to be added far enough under the earth to evade detection from people like Slayer.

Or they could just use their own homes for meetings. Like Tango’s group did.

The Tuff Guys had developed a routine of deciding whose home would be hosting their gatherings by having staring contests after each meeting. Ridiculous as it sounded, it worked for those three. Etho never lost, so it was usually a toss up between Bdubs and Tango.

Jimmy had been frustrated by this when they’d first moved in together, believing he was going to be stuck with these little get-togethers for the rest of his life, but quickly grew to appreciate them once he realized the host was not responsible for food. Bdubs and Etho were suddenly far more welcome when they came with a collection of various snacks tucked under their arms.

Maybe they had an odd alternative to a proper villain base, but it certainly suited them. It would always be better than the amateur route.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the cops drove off. They'd deemed the collapse an accident, and saw nothing to indicate otherwise.

Jimmy sighed, releasing his invisibility and promptly slumping into Tango's arms. The use of energy had been strenuous, more than was probably healthy, but it was the only feasible option when Tango was still regaining strength. Fatigue caught up with him quickly now. He didn't spare his roommate a glance, too content to simply plop his head down on the other man's shoulder.

"Somebody's tired," Tango said softly. His arms came up to wrap around Jimmy's waist, helping to stabilize him. The low rumble of his voice was, as always, delightfully warm. Jimmy felt like he was tucked beneath a pile of blankets, ready to doze off at his nearest possible convenience. "I guess we're both a little exhausted, aren't we?"

"I don't want to hear it," Jimmy huffed, turning his head to speak into the crook of his roommate's neck. "You're the whole reason I'm anywhere near exhausted right now."

He felt Tango shiver, and glanced up at his face. Jimmy was surprised to see that the other was already looking at him, pupils dilated and face tinged pink. It was a sight so lovely — and so dangerously *close* — that it startled Jimmy into jumping back. Which was, as anyone could've predicted, an absolutely terrible choice on his part.

Immediately, his legs gave out, and he was slipping backwards.

Thankfully, Tango's arms stopped him from completely collapsing onto the sidewalk. They ended up, instead, in some amalgamation of limbs, with Tango supporting the slanted line that made up Jimmy's body and their legs slotted awkwardly between one another.

"Geez, man," Tango laughed, cheeks rosy and eyes shining. "You're falling for me a lot lately, aren't you?"

The night sky caught on the golden edges of his hair as it framed his face. He was like the brightest star in the heavens, or a drop of sunlight falling upon the ground below. Taken by the lovely sound of his snickering, and the ridiculous wrinkles of his baggy pajamas in the freezing atmosphere, Jimmy thought he was the most beautiful person to ever exist.

"Always," Jimmy whispered unconsciously.

Tango went still, eyes widening, which made Jimmy realize just how much damning honesty had been reflected in his voice. A dangerous amount could be picked up from that alone. He cleared his throat and forced a smile, but it felt like a weak display.

"Who wouldn't? Look at these muscles," Jimmy deflected expertly, only a little awkward in his delivery. "I bet they're about ready to carry me home, right?"

To lend to his point, he reached up to squeeze at Tango's bicep. All it did was make the other man's blush deepen and send Jimmy's thoughts careening in a direction they did *not* need to go while they were standing beside the fresh remains of an abandoned building. Those images were better suited for a candlelight dinner, or the privacy of his home, if they were to be welcomed at all.

“Right,” Tango said softly. “Always.”

Jimmy’s breath caught in his throat. The arms supporting his torso readjusted, and then he was being swept off his feet. On instinct, he held onto the other’s neck and his eyes fell shut, preparing for the rush of superspeed. Tango muttered a small warning. Then, without any more fanfare, he took off.

Familiar vertigo enveloped Jimmy again, wind pulling at his skin, tangling his hair, trying desperately to rip him away from the grip that kept him in place. He was far more prepared this time, though, so the amount of dizziness that came with the sensation was halved.

Unfortunately, since Tango was taking them across the length of the city, and not simply outrunning a cave-in, they remained in the state of superspeed for a full thirty seconds. It was impossible not to be a little uncomfortable after that. Tango was careful to slow as they approached their destination so that the stillness wouldn’t be too abrupt — a thoughtful gesture, considering his body was resistant enough to handle shocks like that, but Jimmy’s absolutely wasn’t.

It was late enough at night for them to not worry about being spotted. Their neighbors were all on the older side, and none of their lights were on when the two villains arrived on the street.

If Tango *did* ever need to stay under the radar, he’d usually aim to come in through the back door, which just meant running through a load of gardens. As he told Jimmy once, though, he didn’t like doing that unless it was unavoidable. The wind from his superspeed often disrupted the petals of anything blooming along his path, and it made him sad to destroy them aimlessly.

Personally, Jimmy thought it was really funny. It meant the guy came home covered in pollen, with leaves and the remains of flowers stuck

in his hair. And, as an added bonus, it usually required them to sit on the couch together while Jimmy helped untangle all the little branches from his hair that Tango couldn't reach.

Either way, they got to their front door, and Jimmy was unfortunately made to stand on his own two feet. He leaned against the wall to support his shaky legs, watching Tango fish out his key.

Once the door was open, he was helped inside, and directed to his room. Jimmy was able to change out of his debris-covered clothes, and return to the living room in a couple of minutes to find that his roommate had done the same. He flopped down onto the couch, muttering under his breath about his sore limbs. Tango offered him quiet condolences, and stepped out of his line of sight briefly.

Their house wasn't a terribly large thing. It was a little one-floor home on a side street near the city's university, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, living room, dining room, a garage, and an office that had been converted into Tango's evil lair not long after they moved in together.

The other Bamboozlers reminded him often that he could definitely afford his own, much bigger home should he desire it — but that was the thing. He *didn't* desire it.

Jimmy liked that he could hear Tango clinking around in the kitchen from his spot on the couch. Jimmy liked that he woke up to breakfast already made. Jimmy liked that he could stay up all night watching movies and fall asleep cuddled up next to someone else. Jimmy liked, most especially, Tango.

They were never really meant to be roommates for this long. It was originally a temporary arrangement while the Tuff Guys were still getting off the ground. Back then, the Bamboozlers had opted to help

them in any way they could. It was part of a long term scheme to keep the heroes off their backs by giving them another talented villain group to watch, made better by the fact that they weren't as powerful as the Bamboozlers themselves.

At that time, the trio used to all live in the same house together, but Tango got tired of thirdwheeling Bdubs and Etho, and needed a new place to stay. Not wanting inner turmoil to break their scapegoats up before they were even really known, the Bamboozlers proposed a solution: Tango moving in with one of them.

All three of them had space, but Jimmy drew the short straw, and his guest bedroom was occupied by the end of the week. Not that he was complaining now.

"Oh, hello, you two!"

Tango's voice echoed from the other room, raising several octaves as Jimmy guessed two fluffy faces had made themselves known. Sure enough, when his roommate rounded the corner again, he had Norman under one arm, and a mug in his free hand. Flick trailed behind him, sleepily blinking. Both of them were used to the household's late nights, but they still vehemently disapproved of the fact that they weren't always able to be cuddled.

The mug was set down on the coffee table, and then Norman was plopped onto Jimmy's stomach immediately after. The new weight made him huff, but he couldn't be upset when the fluffball curled up and immediately started purring. Tango took his usual seat at the other end of the couch, near where Jimmy was resting his head. Flick jumped onto his lap and mewled until he received sufficient scratches.

"I made you hot chocolate," Tango said, gesturing to the cup. "Drink, before it gets cold."

“Thank you,” Jimmy said. He sat up very slowly to give Norman enough time to shuffle onto his lap. Then, he readjusted his seating, and grabbed the mug. It was warm, delightfully so. The first sip tingled along his tongue, but it tasted perfect. Jimmy always loved a fresh cup of hot chocolate after a mission, especially when it didn’t go entirely to plan.

Which reminded him it was well past time to report that evening’s failures. He sighed and tapped the button on his watch. The earpiece came to life, spouting off its usual, *“Who would you like to call?”*

Jimmy cycled through his options until he landed on the correct one.

“Group call: Bamboozlers.”

He double tapped his earpiece and listened to it buzz. The tell-tale crackling indicated one or both of the others had connected, and he heard Scar’s voice come in, *“Boogeyman? Status update?”*

“No dice, Scar,” Jimmy sighed, leaning into the cushions. His shoulder brushed Tango’s and he did his best not to think about it. “Had a close call with the cops at the last warehouse, so I’m home now, but no sight of our missing doctor.”

“Give Scar my best,” Tango whispered from beside him. It was loud enough to be picked up by the microphone, though.

“Is that Tango? I was wondering how you got back so fast,” came Lizzie’s voice. *“But I guess I have my answer.”*

“Yeah, he sends his regards or whatever,” Jimmy replied, and Tango nodded, satisfied. Flick’s purring increased tenfold as the other man’s attention turned back to him. “Anyway, focusing on the important stuff, now…”

“So, the warehouses are a bust? That’s upsetting,” Scar said. His tone was hollow. Jimmy swallowed down a mixture of guilt and pity. *“What have we not checked yet?”*

“I don’t know,” Jimmy said, taking another sip. The drink burned as it went down. “I feel like we’ve taken a look at every feasible location for a hostage. He’s vanished into thin air.”

“People don’t vanish, aside from you,” Scar huffed. Jimmy could hear the wind against his microphone. He suspected the guy was on some rooftop as they spoke — a mindless action he’d taken to doing as of late. Lizzie and Jimmy were worried about him, but they considered the fresh air probably necessary for his health, and didn’t nag. *“There must be some place we haven’t realized is an option yet? Some clue we’ve overlooked?”*

“Well, we’ve scouted everywhere in a ten mile radius from where he went missing, all the city’s abandoned buildings,” Jimmy recounted. “And two days ago, you had me literally sneak into the Agency’s headquarters to check every single floor.”

Tango perked up. “You snuck into the Agency?”

“Yeah, for a bit,” Jimmy replied, not thinking much of it.

“Isn’t that super dangerous?” Tango leaned closer, brows furrowing. “I heard they have special frequencies over every door that disrupts people’s powers. How’d you get in?”

“Climbed to an open third-story window,” Jimmy told him. “Their tech only works when you step through the intended threshold.”

“You say that like you’ve been there before,” Tango said. He looked concerned now. “Please tell me you aren’t *regularly* sneaking into that place, invisible or not?”

Jimmy pursed his lips. His eyes traveled without his permission to a bookshelf on the far end of the room. The rolled up blueprint of a certain bank was still wedged between some of the books. Anyone who knew where to look might notice the Agency’s logo stamped on the back, certifying that they’d overseen the construction of a building and marked it as ‘villain-proof.’

Not all of the banks in the city boasted about how hard they were to break into the way this particular location had, which had been the reason the three were drawn to it initially. It just so happened that they were aware of the Agency’s tendency to keep a copy of every project they’d ever worked on in their classified archives, and it just so happened to be a fun challenge to see if they could actually get Jimmy inside.

Unfortunately, it *also* just so happened that they hadn’t yet received an updated version of the blueprint after the renovation.

Their plan wasn’t ruined, though, thanks to Grian. They’d learned of the big changes, and were able to readjust. As they found out, the bank had booked an appointment to reapply for their certification, but it was backlogged, giving the Bamboozlers plenty of time to find holes in its defenses before the heroes got a chance to help them out.

But even then, to check all of that, Jimmy had snuck into the Agency

yet again to find what date the heroes actually *were* planning to do their major inspections.

"No, definitely not," Jimmy lied flawlessly. If he focused his attention more onto petting Norman in his lap and pointedly didn't meet his roommate's eyes, then that was completely unrelated. "Like I was saying, we've checked all those places, but there's not a trace of him or the Gs."

Tango tilted his head, an unreadable expression coming over him. It was pensive, almost thoughtful. "You're looking for the Gs specifically? You didn't mention that earlier."

"Stop revealing our classified information," Lizzie hissed into his ear, and Jimmy winced. *"We'll owe them if you don't watch your mouth around your boyfriend."*

"Uh, yeah, sorry," Jimmy said, in response to both parties with whom he was conversing. "It, um, hasn't come up before."

Tango shrugged, obviously not believing that excuse, but being well aware of the boundaries of an opposing villain group all the same. The existence of secrets between them wouldn't be enough to upset him. "As long as you aren't getting hurt."

"I'm not," Jimmy reassured him, nudging his knee. "I'd tell you if it went wrong and I needed help. Promise."

"Alright," Tango hummed, smiling softly. "Then, I'm okay with it. Y'know, since you promised."

“You can come save me again,” Jimmy said, earning a little chuckle of amusement from his companion. He found himself leaning closer to the sound, wishing to hear it again. “What a helpful man you are.”

“He’s totally forgotten we’re on the line, Scar,” Lizzie’s voice interjected. *“He’s too busy gushing over Tango’s big, strong, muscular–”*

“That’s enough,” Jimmy blurted far too loudly, startling everyone in the room and himself. Tango stared at him, wide-eyed and confused. Both Norman and Flick scurried down the hall in an attempt to get away from the noise. Jimmy straightened and cleared his throat, cheeks burning. “Um, sorry. I get your point, Liz.”

“We should wrap this up anyway,” Scar sighed, sounding significantly less enthused by the theatrics. Jimmy’s heart squeezed in his chest, something akin to guilt replacing his embarrassment. *“I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”*

“Right,” Lizzie agreed. *“Bye, you two! Sleep well!”*

The telltale sound of the call going dead rang through Jimmy’s earpiece before he got a chance to add his own farewell, and then he was alone with Tango. He took out the device, placing it on the coffee table beside his watch.

“So, I take it you’re still struggling?”

Jimmy glanced over at Tango. “Yeah, that sums it up.”

“Well, I know you said you’re not allowed to ask for help,” the other started. Gingerly, he scooted closer on the couch until their shoulders

were pressed together, and lowered his voice conspiratorally. “But I did some independent digging.”

Jimmy tensed, both because of the contact and the unexpected statement. “You what?”

“Come on, man,” Tango sighed, rolling his eyes. “You might not have directly told me anything about your case, but I knew *enough.”*

Jimmy gaped, not sure how to respond. Luckily, his roommate was content to continue without prompting.

“You’re dealing with the heroes, right? Well, I couldn’t really hack into the Agency’s systems, but some of the documents they’ve sent out to shareholders weren’t completely encrypted,” Tango elaborated, eyes sparkling like they always did when he was excited. “I guess they thought blacking out some of the more important stuff was enough to keep it safe, but I was able to find necessary details in the unclassified paragraphs.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and swiped over to a collection of screenshots. Upon closer inspection, they were documents, each bearing the Agency’s logo at the top. Most of them were blurry, or blacked out in certain areas as described, but Tango had obviously spent quite a while examining them. He zoomed in on a particular spot, and let Jimmy’s eyes scan it.

“Funding for new safe houses,” Jimmy read aloud. “Abandoning or renovating the old ones? What–?”

“Don’t you see what this means?” Tango jerked his phone back in favor of shoving himself further into Jimmy’s personal space. “There’s unused hero-only spaces hidden all around town, specially designed to

not be found by villains, and some of them are abandoned by the Agency!"

Abandoned by the Agency, designed not to be found by villains, hidden all around town.

"Oh my *God."*

The Agency's old safe houses. It was so obvious that he almost wanted to slap himself for not thinking of it on his own.

They had spent the past week searching for Grian, but had turned up absolutely no leads. It was like he'd disappeared alongside the Gs without a trace. They'd tried every place that made sense to them as villains – every place *they* would've taken a person if they were to ever abduct someone.

The Gs were an unpredictable force, with murky motivations, and unclear alliances – not quite heroes, but not quite *not* heroes either. Whether they were working with the Agency or alone, that did not negate the fact that they still had access to certain privileges that other kidnappers would not. One such privilege being the knowledge of those safe house locations.

The Agency was equally as unlikely to check up on their abandoned safe houses as the Bamboozlers were to know about them, making those the perfect areas to hide something of untold importance.

Like a person.

Jimmy felt as though he might faint. Tango was too busy puffing up

his chest to immediately notice.

"I learned about it earlier today. I was waiting for you to get home so that I could tell you." Tango grinned, visibly proud of himself. "Awesome, right?"

"Yeah, woah," Jimmy replied, out of breath. He opened and closed his mouth several times. A barrage of emotions, both good and bad, flooded his mind. Jimmy wanted to shower Tango in praise, at the same time as he felt nausea rising in the back of his throat. In the end, all he could say was, "You… shouldn't have done that."

His companion raised a brow, excitement dimming slightly. "What? Why not?"

"You *know* why," Jimmy muttered, slumping. "You weren't supposed to help us at all. We can't give you any favors."

"Oh, is that what you're worried about?" Tango threw one arm over the back of the couch. Were Jimmy not so preoccupied with his own fretting, he might've had enough energy to flush at the way it brought them closer. "It's fine, dude. I don't need any favors."

"Tango," Jimmy whispered, shaking his head. "No, that's not how that works. If we follow your advice, and we find our doctor, we'll owe you. It doesn't matter if you *want* a favor or not, because this would be such a monumental thing that it would *have* to be repaid."

Tango didn't seem too thrilled by this announcement. He simply stared at Jimmy in silence, chewing on the inside of his cheek in thought. Then, without warning, his eyes widened, and his face became red enough to raise the room's temperature.

“What?” Jimmy frowned. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing,” Tango quickly blurted. He began to laugh nervously and glance around. “Just, uh, some stupid idea. I was trying to think of something small I might want from you guys, but that was really dumb of me. Geez, it’s late, isn’t it? Maybe I should just–!”

Tango stood without warning, and cold air rushed to fill the spot at Jimmy’s side where he’d once been. Discontent and confused, the sitting man caught his companion’s wrist before he could flee.

“Wait,” Jimmy said. “You can’t leave before telling me what you’d want! This is a really big deal, Tango. If you’ve come up with a request, I promise I’ll do everything in my power to fulfill it.”

Tango’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Can it… Can it be a favor that involves only you? Not the rest of your team?”

A favor that he could deal with on his own? Grian wouldn’t have to be traded like an item, and Scar and Lizzie wouldn’t have to stress over paying back debts that they had no part in creating? Was such a perfect arrangement *possible?*

Jimmy felt his heart swell, and he nodded vehemently. “Yes, anything.”

“Well, in that case,” Tango replied, suddenly growing quiet. He readjusted their hands so that their fingers were intertwined. Jimmy blinked down at the contact, mouth falling open in confusion. He glanced up to see that Tango had gotten impossibly redder, and that a small, shy smile had begun to spread across his features. “Would you

mind if I took you on a date sometime?"

Jimmy froze.

A date.

A date with Tango.

A blush sprang up to his cheeks. Suddenly, his tongue was too big for his mouth, releasing a torrent of nonsensical ramblings into the space between them. Jimmy's stomach churned with butterflies, fingertips tingling where they traced the calluses on Tango's palm. Not a single coherent thought escaped him.

"Hey, breathe, man," Tango chuckled. His other hand rose to cup at Jimmy's jaw, causing him to clamp his mouth shut abruptly, stunned. "You don't have to say yes if this isn't mutual. I wouldn't want some silly favor to force you into something that makes you uncomfortable."

"No," Jimmy shouted, jerking forward to press the other's touch further against his skin. Tango's brows raised. "I mean, *yes!* Sorry! Yes, I'd love to go on a date. No, you're not forcing me."

"Really?" Tango brightened, a spark lighting in his eyes. "You'd actually want to?"

"So badly," Jimmy reiterated, before promptly wincing at his own desperate tone. He cleared his throat, going for a more nonchalant approach. "Whenever, uh, suits you best. I'm down."

“Cool,” Tango said. “Seems like a pretty even exchange for that information, then.”

“Yeah.” Dazed, all Jimmy could do was echo, “Cool.”

Seemingly content with that response, Tango released his hold and stepped back. “I’ll, uh, leave you to tell your teammates for the time being. Once you find your missing friend, you can take me up on that favor.”

“Right,” Jimmy whispered. He straightened, coming back to himself. “Yeah, definitely.”

Tango nodded, and disappeared down the hall without another word. Jimmy watched him go until he heard his bedroom door fall shut. Then, he lunged for his earpiece.

He had quite a bit to tell the others.

Grian was getting *really* sick of questions.

He had no estimation of how long it had been since he was taken, nor how long he was out after his interrogation. Grian had been visited for brief intervals every few hours, usually only by one or two people at a time. They'd ask him a few things, and then leave again, repeating the routine endlessly.

Daybreak had been the first to try her hand at getting information out of him once he was awake. She hadn't come in wearing her weapons – the sleeves that held both of her blades on her forearms having obviously been disconnected for comfort. In the end, she didn't need them.

Daybreak revisited the question about Ringmaster's real name, and then dared to inquire about Eclipse and Boogeyman as well. When Grian refused to tell her anything, she broke one of his ribs in a single, swift punch.

As he heard the crunch of bone, felt the snap within his chest, gasped for air only to come up short, all he could think was, *"Oh, so* this *is what it feels like."*

"It's in your best interest to tell us what we want to know," she had said. There wasn't as much malice in her tone this time around, but her eyes were anything but friendly. "Before we have to consider other measures."

"Ask me questions I can answer," Grian panted, wincing as every intake of air felt like it wasn't quite enough. "And we'll see."

She'd departed while he was still reeling from the pain and gasping into the quiet of the room. He was alone all at once, only the shrieking ache of his own chest collapsing inwards as company. His heart pounded, each pump of blood through his veins serving to worsen the pressure.

Daybreak hadn't bothered switching off the lights during her abrupt exit. At first, he considered the brightness to be a blessed break from the dark. Now, however, with his entire body revolting and hair-raising fear running like a cool blade against his skin, it was far too bright. His eyes throbbed, probably bloodshot and watering.

He couldn't believe that she'd gone so far as to break a bone over one unanswered question. The escalation had been so fast, so impossible to counter, that it had taken a little chunk of his soul with it. Grian's resolve chipped more and more as he scraped through breaths, undeniable terror spreading through him.

What if this was only the beginning? Didn't torture methods usually move from the least painful to the most? If that was true, what did these heroes have planned for him? What could be worse than this unending ache? What was going to happen to him when he found an answer to those wonderings?

Grian wished for sleep, suddenly. He wished to be unconscious again. He wished for his mind to succumb to the throbbing, if only to numb him for the duration of his slumber. Perhaps that had disoriented him, stolen his idea of the hours, ruined his one hope for tracking the passing seconds, but at least he hadn't been hurting.

The vet squeezed his eyes shut, tried to slow his breathing, tried to exist beyond his traitorous pulse, but it was impossible to escape those horrible *lights.* They burned through his eyelids, stealing any hope for self-inflicted darkness. Grian found it difficult to sleep or get

comfortable under the watchful gaze of the fluorescents. He would not find relief any time soon, it seemed.

Blackhole had visited next. He came two, maybe three hours after Daybreak, and he did not use the door. His appearance was sudden, like a vacuum had been opened a few feet in front of Grian. One moment, the vet was alone, and the next, he was not.

The manifestation of a tall, stocky frame in his sightline startled him from the daze he'd managed to drift into. Grian sucked in a quick breath, which immediately irritated his ribs again, and sent him into a coughing fit.

As he'd curled in on himself as much as possible to hack out all of his oxygen, Grian had felt supremely weak. Blackhole was unmoving, silent, and ominous. His presence demanded to be noticed, taking up twice the space that the vet's own, puny figure did while bound to the chair.

Like Daybreak, he'd come unarmed, meaning his giant gloves were nowhere to be seen. Despite that, he gave off a feeling of dangerous strength. Subconsciously, Grian found himself muttering a series of hasty prayers to any god that might listen that this man would not see fit to demonstrate his training. Another broken bone was the last thing the vet wanted to deal with at that point.

Blackhole stayed silent for a good several seconds, simply observing the state in which his teammate had left their prisoner. It was impossible to read his expression through the mask, but Grian guessed it was probably mocking. He had to be taking some sort of sick pleasure in the easy way his enemy had been broken.

Then, without warning, there came a sound that resembled an almost fond chuckle. It echoed around the room, amplified tenfold by the

time it reached Grian's ears.

"She roughed you up good, didn't she?"

Grian bit the inside of his cheek harshly to keep from spitting something aggressive back. He was not in the mood for whatever retaliation his attitude might bring just yet. Fortunately, it didn't seem like the other wanted a response to his rhetorical question.

Blackhole kneeled in front of him, not unlike what Morphling had done initially. It made Grian flinch, leaning as far back into his chair as he could go. That blank, expressionless face worsened his anxieties. At least with Morphling and Daybreak, he'd been able to see their emotions. He couldn't brace for anything from this guy.

"Hey, bud. I've come to ask you a different question from the kind you've already seen," Blackhole said. He spoke slowly, annunciating every syllable, almost like he was talking down a wild animal. "You don't feel like telling us the names of your friends, right? So, how about we go with something easier, okay?"

Grian narrowed his eyes, suspicion chewing a hole in his brain. His body was already bruised and beaten with evidence of what happened if he failed to answer a question, so he wasn't keen on receiving any more, no matter how easy they supposedly were. He kept quiet, waiting to see what exactly the hero had in store for him.

"Do your hands hurt?"

The vet paused, confused at first. Hesitantly, he muttered, "Um, what?"

“Your hands have been cuffed for ages,” Blackhole reiterated. Again, he spoke slowly, taking care to make sure each word was heard before proceeding on to the next. “Would you like me to loosen them for a bit?”

The hero reached for something in his pocket. Grian tensed, expecting a weapon, maybe a knife or an even less friendly object. Instead, Blackhole held up something small and silver.

It was a *key*.

Grian straightened, despite how it hurt his chest to do so. His mind scanned the other’s body language, running over every exchanged word in the past several minutes. He didn’t immediately spot any signs of intended harm, and Blackhole kneeling down *had* removed some of the intimidation factor he got by being tall.

Inadvertedly, the vet moved his wrists, as if to check that he was, in fact, in pain. They were raw and had lost circulation from his lack of movement, buzzing with an uncomfortable static. He hadn’t taken as much notice of them in favor of mentally coddling his broken rib, but without a doubt, he wanted those cuffs loosened. His mouth was practically watering at the concept alone.

But Blackhole’s offer didn’t make complete sense. It was unclear what he was gaining from helping Grian to feel more comfortable. He had some theories – supposing that maybe the Gs were going for a different, more friendly tactic with this specific individual.

His nose scrunched before he could hide the reaction. The idea of his tormentors sending in one member of their team to play moderator, to pretend to be on Grian’s side, all for the purpose of earning his trust, was nauseating. It was better not to give in to Blackhole at all. Any amount of comfort, if it came at the price of his friends’ safety, was

not worth the risk.

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t give me that,” the man tutted, sounding like a disapproving parent through the distortion of his modulator. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Without waiting for Grian to give any more consent towards the matter, he blinked out of view, and reappeared behind the chair.

Immediately, the vet jerked, a motion which sent him into yet another coughing fit as his rib shifted uncomfortably in his chest. Not being able to see the hero, and being physically prevented from turning to right that sent shuddering terror crawling up his spine.

A hand placed itself in the space between his shoulderblades, and his coughing got worse. For a second, he thought he could taste blood, but he was too distracted to give that much thought. Blackhole’s palm was large enough to grab his spine and snap it in a quick movement if that was what he wished to do.

Grian’s heart hammered at the thought, growing worse as the hero shushed him gently. “There, there,” Blackhole mumbled. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

The hand retracted, and with it went some of Grian’s fear, but not enough. His chest *ached,* and his throat was sore from the rasping breaths he was failing to fully intake. The hero waited for a second longer, just until the vet was mostly quiet.

“All done?” Blackhole clicked his tongue. “She did quite the number on you. Don’t worry about that from me. I’m just gonna unlock these cuffs, and that’s it. Is that alright?”

Grian blinked back tears from the force of his agony. He barely heard the question, but some part of him clearing his throat must’ve sounded like a confirmation, because a hand wrapped around his forearms. His heart flipped, pulse skyrocketing.

A bit of metallic clanking rang out, as well as some shuffling as he felt what he assumed to be Blackhole angling himself towards the keyhole properly. It took far longer than Grian would’ve expected for the simple act of unlocking handcuffs, serving to unnerve him more.

“These things are so tricky sometimes,” the hero muttered. “I almost need my reading glasses. Oh! Got one!”

Grian sucked in a breath as the cuff around his left hand loosened, and then fell away entirely. The vet was quick to pull his hand around to his front, flexing his numb fingers. There was a ring of redness around his wrist from where the pressure had been cutting into his skin. As soon as his right hand was freed as well, he rubbed at those sore spots, desperate for any amount of relief he could get.

“I thought you were just going to loosen them,” Grian said as Blackhole — *thankfully* — stepped back into view again. “Why did you release me completely?”

“Oh, that’s no big deal.” Blackhole tilted his head, a small laugh echoing yet again around the room. “Handcuffs hardly matter in our situation anyway. Your torso and legs are still tied to the chair, but even if you did get out of those at record speed and break for the door…”

His form disappeared and reappeared right in front of the exit in less than an instant.

Grian heard a smile in his voice as he hummed, “I will *always* be faster.”

The vet hadn’t doubted that for a second, but seeing just how immediately his exit route could be cut off was demoralizing on an entirely new level. It felt, suddenly, like his release wasn’t an effort to make him more comfortable, but an excuse for the hero to flaunt how truly helpless his prisoner was.

Grian hardened his heart, forcing himself to remember that no act of kindness in this scenario was ever going to be fully real. This man was affording him the benefit of the doubt solely because, in his eyes, this wasn’t enough to compromise them. He’d already suspected as much, and that throwaway comment simply solidified it. If Grian were able to land a reliable hit in combat, or move around undetected like his friends, then this wouldn’t have been happening. It was because he was lesser than the hero that he was allowed to have these thoughts in the first place.

“Anyway,” Blackhole restarted, teleporting back to where he’d been standing in front of the chair. No longer kneeling, his large shadow cast Grian into darkness — not quite as complete of an inky black as the room around him could get, but it ate away at his sanity all the same. “Feel better?”

Unlike with some of his other inquiries, Blackhole seemed to be expecting a response to this. Grian didn’t want to reply, didn’t want to give these people the honor of his words, but this was not the hill that he wanted to die on either. “I suppose.”

“Great,” Blackhole chirped, clapping his hands together. The sharp sound ricocheted off the walls like a careless bullet, burying itself deep inside Grian’s brain. “Is there anything else I can do for you while I’m here?”

An ominous question, to be sure, from someone that had kidnapped him. It was plain, at first glance, but Grian had a knack for overanalyzing. He did not miss the subtle way a comment like that removed the blame from the one that asked it.

Blackhole was the only person between the two of them who knew about the group’s intent for their prisoner. He knew when they’d feed him, bring him water, let him sleep, restart their interrogations. The question represented their glaring power imbalance, taunting the vet with the idea that this might be the last time he’d be afforded kindness. Grian could not begin to guess when next he would have the chance to request help, comfort, or basic necessities, so there was no world in which he could refuse to do that now, even if he wanted to.

And *God,* did he want to.

Grian wanted to spit in his face and tell him to go to hell, at the same time as he wanted to curl up and become numb to avoid experiencing what was happening around him.

But if he did that, and it actually was the last time he was able to request any amount of comfort, Blackhole would be able to write it off in his conscience by saying, *“Well, I asked, and he refused.”*

There was no world in which he would allow his tormentor to be able to justify his own wrongdoing by putting the decision in Grian’s hands.

He took a deep breath — as deep as his ribs would let him — and settled on a simple answer:

“Is there a chance I might be able to use the bathroom at all?”

Blackhole perked up, almost like he hadn’t been expecting the vet to actually give in. A convincing act, though Grian saw the way his weight had shifted onto his heels in the middle of the sentence, as if predicting exactly where the vet would want to go. He’d been correct, then, in his initial analysis. Were Grian not overly observant of the habits of others, Blackhole might’ve gotten away with it.

Expectedly, as nothing happening was unplanned, Blackhole agreed. He untied the vet fully, and after a patient moment of watching Grian try and fail multiple times to stand up, finally led him down the hall. The pace was slow, but it was an unbelievable relief after so long in the same position. He basked in the feeling of blood flow returning to his feet with every step he took.

His circumstances didn’t improve in the world beyond. There was yet another windowless room outside of his own, though this one was not empty. It was furnished like a living room, with couches, tables, chairs, and a mounted television. Grian spotted two doors branching off from this area, three if he counted the direction from which he’d just come.

It was through one of those two doors and down a hallway – unsurprisingly, lined with more doors – that Grian was let into a bathroom. The room was small, and bland. No decorations, and no color could be seen anywhere in the vicinity, much like the rest of the place. When he stepped inside, however, he had to actively bite back a gasp.

There, against the far wall, located right over the toilet, was a *window*.

It was small, like the kind one might find in a basement, but it was a window nonetheless. Daylight was streaming through it, though it was dull, probably indicating dusk or dawn.

“I’m giving you five minutes, alright? Don’t lock the door,” Blackhole said. “I’ll be out here.”

Grian did his best to give the hero a haphazard smile, hoping to appear grateful, even amidst the torrent of conflicting emotions running through him. It seemed to appease the other well enough. The door was pulled shut and Grian nearly toppled over with relief.

Five minutes wasn’t a lot of time, but it was something. He needed to use it wisely.

Grian was silent as he moved, lowering the toilet lid and climbing atop it to get level with the window. His first realization, disappointingly, was that nothing could be seen from it. The pane was blurred for privacy, and the hinges looked rusted, like they hadn’t been utilized in a while. Grian knew opening it would make too much noise, anyway.

His second realization was that the window was skinnier than his initial observation had surmised. It was probably possible to escape through it, but one would have to shimmy awkwardly to get that done. Grian already felt his broken rib aching from the thought. With such a fresh injury, he’d be severely inhibited.

This would have to be something he worked himself up to attempting. Right now, especially with a hero that could teleport anywhere in a matter of moments guarding the door, it was not smart to act recklessly.

He recalled what the Bamboozlers had told him once about amateur criminals – they'd make shoddy plans, and eliminate the easy route for everyone with their carelessness. The bathroom window was the first one he'd seen, so losing the privilege of being allowed to visit this room wasn't smart.

He got off the seat before his time was up, since he really did need to use the bathroom. Grian made that quick, finishing up and washing his hands thoroughly to help with the remaining pain of the cuffs. For good measure, he splashed his face, then bent to drink from the tap. Whether the water was properly filtered or not, he couldn't bring himself to care. It soothed his throat all the same.

When he straightened again, Grian got a good look at his reflection. He hadn't been in custody for long, but it was already beginning to show on his features. His hair was a mess, eyes dull, and lips chapped. The cut on his throat had scabbed over, but it was still red and uncomfortable.

His arm had a burn on it from Morphling's staff. Blessedly, though, it wasn't bad enough to blister. It would heal in due time. What worried him was more so the slight shaking in his hand. He only noticed it now that he was paying attention to his own physical state, but a tremor as a result of the shock was a dangerous side effect. Had the shock been enough to cause serious, permanent damage, there was a chance he wouldn't be able to continue being a vet in the future.

If he even *had* a future ahead of him.

But that was too grim. He needed to maintain some amount of hope, or he was not going to survive this. There *would* be a future.

Grian continued with his physical observations. Checking beneath his scrubs, he saw an expected amount of intense bruising from the two punches he'd endured. The discoloration, soreness, and swelling was something he anticipated worsening in the hours to come if his first interrogation attempts were any indication.

A knock sounded at the door, meaning his time was up. No more daylight, no more standing, no more access to running water until the heroes felt like bringing him here again.

Grian centered himself, and finally, opened the door. Blackhole's blank face waited on the other side. With only a nod of his head, he gestured them back in the direction of that dreaded room. Grian rubbed his wrists for the entirety of the walk, trying to ready them for being bound again.

He was not expecting to be led inside, and then greeted with awkward silence. Blackhole cleared his throat, stepping back and holding the doorknob as if he were about to leave. Grian frowned at him, confused.

"There's a sleeping bag in that corner, and the light switch is over here," the hero said. "I'm the last one coming to check on you for a bit, so make yourself comfortable."

Then, without attempting to interrogate him further or adding to the vet's growing list of injuries, he closed the door. Grian was alone again.

It was different from the first two times his tormentors had left him, though. He could walk around, reach the light switch, explore his options. Opting not to take that small mercy for granted, Grian had made use of his mobility.

He stretched out his limbs, working to relieve some amount of tension from his muscles. Grian had to be careful not to stress out his broken rib, but it was impossible to avoid some amount of pain.

Once he could move without aching too horribly, Grian followed the perimeter of the room. The door was an obvious place to start. He pushed on it, listened to the way it groaned, but noted that it was firmly locked. It'd be too thick for him to try and kick down or go through, so escaping once it was unlocked would be the only way.

Next, he felt along every bit of the wall that he could reach. It took him about an hour to thoroughly conclude that the place was impenetrable to a normal man — no hidden doors, loose bricks, or exploitable secrets to be found. This wasn't a prison-break movie, where he could whittle away at a crack until it was big enough to slip through, or a murder mystery, where pressing in just the right spot might lead him to an unexplored passage. Wherever he was being kept, it was designed to be hard to get into and out of on purpose.

The sleeping bag was investigated after that. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary from a cursory glance, just a black roll of fabric. He didn't find any razor blades for him to cut himself on, or creepy crawlies to tickle him as he tried to sleep. For all intents and purposes, it was exactly what it appeared to be.

Not that it was ever going to cushion much upon a concrete floor, as Grian discovered when he relented and lowered himself onto it. Without a doubt, should he attempt to sleep upon that dreadful thing, he'd wake with a dozen cricks in his neck and back. Unfortunately, he didn't have a lot of other options if he wanted to rest. He wouldn't get in the chair again unless forced, so the only alternative was the cold stone ground.

Sprawling out flat was perhaps the worst thing he could've done for

his ribs. Every breath in had him immensely aware of the way his bones popped and moved unnaturally. Medical journals about the dangers of a broken rib puncturing a lung flooded him, to the point where anxiety replaced any fatigue he might've had in his body. The pain was, of course, ever constant all the while. Sitting up was going to be tough when he'd inevitably be forced to do so.

To distract himself, Grian stared up at the ceiling and allowed his mind to travel to hypotheticals. First and foremost, especially when he was surrounded only by his own solitude, he thought of Scar.

Grian looked down at his arm, staring at the blank spot on his wrist where his beloved watch had once been. Scar had put a tracker in it all those months ago, which should've been alarming, but the vet's skewed morals weren't bothered in the slightest. He wanted it back, that precious token of the world beyond that hostile room, if only to have another piece of Scar nearby him.

He wondered if his partner was alright. How was he taking Grian's strange disappearance? Was he sad, angry, or had he fallen into that chilling calm he sometimes exhibited whilst scheming? Was he taking the time to feed himself, or do his exercises? Were the cats getting on his nerves, or had much remained the same with them?

Grian longed for the safety of Scar's arms around him. He longed to come home to a warm apartment after his shift at the clinic and kiss his boyfriend until both of them felt satiated from their time apart. He longed to curl up on his couch, a cheesy movie playing in the background and his cats purring in his lap.

The vet didn't know how much time he wasted like that, just dreaming of all the ways he'd rather be spending his day. Perhaps he should've been thinking tactically, plotting his escape now that he knew of the existence of a window, but the siren call of his memories with Scar had been impossible to block out.

Three, six, even eight hours could've passed, and he wouldn't have known the difference. It was dizzying to feel it go by too quickly, and yet, not fast enough. His throat grew dry, and his stomach grumbled more and more with each endless minute – his only indication of the continuous movement of the world around him, even as he remained stagnant.

Grian hardly registered the opening of the door through his own disorientation. The hinges gave a piercing screech, accompanied by confident steps, and it was only then that he noticed a person had entered his room. He sat up, wincing and gritting his teeth against the loud complaint of his torso.

Clad in their typical inky black costume, Necromancer was the one to greet him this time around. While she didn't have her bow slung over her back, they hadn't entered empty-handed either. A tray of simple food was tucked under their arm – a bowl of cereal, a glass of milk, and some water. His stomach growled, twisting and desperate, at the sight.

Instead of bringing it to him, she left it on the floor beside the door, obviously having alternative intentions for their first one-on-one meeting. Grian wasn't surprised by the idea of them waving food in front of his face as a bargaining chip. He was mostly just disappointed that such an event had finally come to pass. It felt cartoonishly mean.

"I'm only here to get a couple of things straightened out," they said, approaching him where he'd curled up against the far wall. Grian was sure he looked pathetic, knees pulled up to his chest and bags under his eyes, but didn't care. He glared anyway. "These are going to be yes or no questions. Understand?"

Grian didn't like where this was going, but he was tired and scared and he wanted a bite of that food *so* badly. Something about the

cocking of Necromancer's hip told him that was a privilege to be earned alongside his answers. Meals, it seemed, would not be freely available to him for the foreseeable future.

Hungry, Grian nodded. It was curt, quick, barely visible unless one was paying close attention. Luckily, he probably could've felt Necromancer's gaze burning into his head from a million miles away.

"Perfect." With that confirmation, she sat herself on the ground across from him. "Your name is Grian and you're a veterinarian, correct?"

Again, Grian nodded.

"Out loud, please. The cameras need to be able to hear you."

Cameras. Grian knew they were there, but it unnerved him that he hadn't spotted them on his own yet. Constant surveillance from a source that was hidden from casual view. It was a panopticon and a nightmare scenario, like he was a lab rat inside a cage, his every move capable of being seen without his knowledge. The thought manifested into an itch on the back of his neck. No matter how he scratched it, though, it did not cease.

"Yes," he relented. "I am."

"You've been the one responsible for providing medical care for the Bamboozlers in place of an actual physician," they went on. "Correct?"

This inquiry made him hesitate. It was incriminating, and now, knowing the cameras were likely keeping a record of every crime he

admitted aloud, he wasn't as keen to tell the truth. But these were, as previously stated, clarifying questions. Necromancer knew the answers, and would know when he was lying. It wasn't worth the potential backlash to be stubborn over these little details. "Yes, I have."

"You're aware this is against the law, correct?"

"Yes."

"Yet, you went through with this illegal assistance anyway?"

Grian hung his head, wishing himself away from this scenario, even if he didn't have any regrets. "I did."

Necromancer clicked her tongue, pursing her lips beneath her veil. Disgusted disappointment seemed to radiate off them. "God, I can't understand for the life of me why anyone would willingly do that."

A huff of disbelieving laughter was pushed out of Grian, surprising both him and the hero. He hadn't known his lungs, never mind his morale, were capable of things like *laughter* during moments such as these. It was the absurdity of his situation, combined now with his lack of rest, that had him speaking his mind as though he weren't scared of the consequences of provoking this person.

"Really? You're commenting on the legality of *my* choices?" He gestured to his surroundings. "You *kidnapped* me!"

"For the greater good," Necromancer replied, unphased. "Has anyone ever told you that you're irritating?"

Grian scoffed, “Is this still part of your little yes or no questionnaire?”

“Sure, if it’ll make you answer me,” she casually reasoned. The vet was, however, nothing if not stubborn during times he absolutely shouldn’t have been. Grian glared at them, mouth remaining shut. “Fine. Be that way.”

They stood, walking back towards the door. The food was still over there. He expected her to direct him towards it, or take it away. Instead, she turned to face him again, and pointed a finger at the chair in the center of the room.

“Stand.”

Their command was odd in its delivery and tonality. The hissing of the modulator seemed to fluctuate, rising into thousands of little whispers that all combined into a singular voice. It sounded as though a storm had begun to brew, winds whistling in time to a haunting melody that only they truly understood. Necromancer harnessed that now in the form of that one tiny word.

Grian opened his mouth, almost as if to oppose them. He wanted to say that he would not stand, that he wished to stay on the ground, that he didn’t care how much extravagance was put into the demand, he would not listen. Instead of spouting anything like that, though, he was struck by a wave of lightheadedness. His whole body fell limp, shoulders drooping, hands falling by his sides, head sagging uselessly on his neck.

It was like being struck with a bout of paralysis. He knew himself to be capable of movement, of resisting this enchanting pull, but when he reached for the strings within his mind to direct his body according

to his will, Grian found that another puppeteer had stolen them right out from under his nose.

Then, horrifically, Grian watched his legs begin to move.

It was as if they were a separate entity, possessed and bearing a mind of their own. They shuffled underneath him, pushing him up slowly, slowly, and straightening once the whole of his weight was atop them. It was a sharp, hasty action, taken with no care towards his physical ailments.

Grian wanted to cry out, to struggle and fight and get away from the control that yanked at his muscles, but he could not. He was not the conductor spearheading this ghastly composition. No matter how much terror and sheer *wrongness* gathered in the pit of his stomach, his form did not stop.

He felt like a fool, absolutely and completely. Somewhere in the mix between stressing over an interrogation and further harm, Grian had forgotten to account for ways this particular hero could hijack the bits of himself that were the most sacred. Necromancer's mind control was something he should've taken into account from the moment she appeared in front of him.

While tangled in their web, they could make him do anything, say anything, and there was nothing he could do to oppose it. She seemed intent on helping him further realize the extent of his dilemma now.

"Sit in the chair."

Exactly as instructed, Grian's legs began to drag him to the chair, step by uncontrollable step. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could make out a glimpse of a smile on the other's face. He collapsed

hard into the chair, no amount of gentleness in his descent. It twinged in his broken rib, and all along the various other little bruises that decorated him.

"Now, I think it's time to get back to our little yes or no segment of this interrogation," the hero said, sauntering nearer. *"Answer my questions honestly."*

A flip seemed to switch inside of him. It was as if a tidal wave had swept through his mind, rearranging the very components that made him up. Every lie he'd told over the course of his life was lost to him, washed just out of reach. Only the truth was available.

Grian's eyes widened in recognition of the worst possible scenario for him as it began. He braced as best he could, but it would not be enough, and he knew that to be a fact in the same way that he knew the sky was blue. Without the mental capacity to keep them out, Necromancer could learn anything she wanted from him.

She was not about to waste the chance.

"Were you aware of the Bamboozlers' plot to rob that bank prior to it happening?"

"Yes," Grian's voice said, though he was not the one forming the words. He winced, trying to push against the force occupying his brain, but it was no use. It was like slamming his fist into a brick wall repeatedly, only serving to damage him further. The hypnotic hissing of Necromancer's powers was too strong.

"Did they know our flash drive was in there when they picked the location?"

Again, lacking the ability to hesitate, the truth bubbled up and spilled at her feet. “No, they didn’t.”

He was sick, nauseated by his own shortcomings. Grian almost missed Necromancer’s choice of words, almost missed the slight way they’d dropped a crumb at his feet, almost missed a hint towards something the Bamboozlers had been speculating about for weeks.

Had Necromancer just called it *their* flash drive?

Grian’s mind whirled more now, not only because of the unwelcome guest occupying his skull. The hero didn’t seem to notice his pause, though, because they carried on.

“Interesting,” Necromancer hummed. *“Do you know the location of the Bamboozlers’ hidden base?”*

“No,” Grian reflexively answered, the responses coming faster now that the roots of her control had acclimatized. He hardly had a second to debate them as they were formed.

“Even more interesting, but definitely unfortunate. My time is almost up,” she sighed. *“Quickly, what is Ringmaster’s real name?”*

Grian’s stomach dropped, blood running cold.

Scar’s name flashed through his mind in an instantaneous collage of all of his months spent with the man. He recalled the first night it’d been told to him, the chemistry sparking between them palpable even

through the effects of alcohol. He remembered the first time he'd seen the face associated with it, a portrait of perfection that he'd immortalized within his heart. He was reminded most vividly of how easily it rolled off the tongue, and how nice it felt to say it.

Assisted by the handful of other, less painful questions, it began to form on his tongue with ease. Fear spiked alongside it, combined with reactionary impulses that refused to be fulfilled because of the grip Necromancer had over his mind. He wanted to bite his tongue, swallow the word to send it out of reach, spit in the hero's face instead.

But he couldn't. Grian was going to speak it aloud, admit it against his will, reveal the secret that had been entrusted to him in confidence so long ago, and he was powerless to stop it. He waited for the wreckage, waited to hear the information he'd guarded so carefully come spilling out.

But instead, there was nothing.

A buzzing sensation, similar and yet different from pins and needles of a limb falling asleep swept over him. Goosebumps rose on his skin, and he shuddered, frowning at the unpleasantness.

Necromancer let out a grunt, as though she'd just been stabbed through the gut. They stumbled a step back, hitting the door harder than they'd probably intended. Grian's head shot up to follow the sound, and he realized he was capable of movement again. If he weren't so horrified by the fact that he'd lost control in the first place, he might've been relieved.

"Ugh, *great,"* the hero grumbled. "Out of time."

They reached up to their mouth, and when their hand came back down, it was stained a familiar shade of red.

"You're bleeding?" Grian glanced over at her, ducking his head to try and find the source of the wound under the veil. He couldn't make out much before Necromancer was ducking their head further to fully block his view. His nose scrunched, confusion furrowing in his brows. "Why would you be *bleeding?"*

That earned him a little snort.

"Aw, what a caring doctor you are," they teased, condescension ripe in their tone. "If you must know, I just overdid it. I'll get some rest, and then I'll be back to squeeze everything out of you later. Alright?"

Grian's curiosity died in his chest. The idea of repeating that horrendous experience was enough to make him want to shrivel up and never speak again. He glowered at her as she straightened and stepped out of the room, pausing in the threshold only to point a finger down at the food.

"Better eat while it's still good. See you around!"

The door slammed and locked behind them.

Grian wished he could say he didn't have an appetite. He wished he didn't want to accept something that the hero had offered him. He wished his stomach weren't practically eating itself in his gut. The cereal wasn't much, consisting of some bland, featureless squares and little else, but anything looked heavenly in that moment.

He hadn't taken a single bite of anything since lunchtime on the day he was kidnapped. Morphling and Daybreak had plucked him off the street right at dinnertime, and then subjected him to untold hours of waiting before presenting this.

Grian was loath to hesitate for a single second more, but he forced himself to stay still until Necromancer's receding footsteps could no longer be heard. Then, he pounced upon it, eating so fast that he hardly remembered the taste. It wasn't much, but it would do to keep him satiated for a bit longer.

Blackhole visited soon after he finished. It was a mostly unremarkable experience, very similar to his first interaction with Grian. He repeated his prior actions again. Grian was walked to the bathroom without any invasive questions being sent his way, and with Blackhole putting on that same persona of friendliness the whole while.

Having him magically appear twice in a row following the vet having a bad experience during an interrogation was establishing a pretty clear pattern. The Gs, it seemed, were intent on trying out their good-cop-bad-cop routine on him, welcomed or not.

Honestly, it was irritating, like they were attempting to cure a burn wound by rubbing ice on the affected area and praying the temperature change was enough to smooth over the pain completely. Maybe if Blackhole were a better actor, and his timing weren't so completely obvious, Grian would've fallen for it.

As it was, though, he'd just gone through something intensely unpleasant, and this was not helping his backlog of negative emotions. Before he knew it, some of his thoughts were slipping out, too prominent and uncomfortable to rest within him. Against his better judgement, he let out what he could.

“So,” Grian started. They walked slowly back to the room from the bathroom to accommodate his pain. “Why did you get saddled with this nice guy act?”

“Not an act,” Blackhole replied. “Believe it or not, I actually *do* like helping people. I’m a hero, at the end of the day.”

“Yeah, feels like it,” Grian grumbled.

“Hey, mister,” the other man scolded as he held the door open for Grian to step inside. His shoulders were tense, voice raising into a defensive octave. Despite the vet only muttering the one comment, somehow, a chord must’ve been struck. “You’ve only got one side of the story. In the end, we’ll help a lot more people than we’ll hurt.”

Tired, fed up, and more than a little emotionally pent up, Grian found himself latching onto this morsel of vulnerability that was being shown to him. Blackhole disliked the idea of not being seen as the hero in this scenario, despite all the moral ambiguity happening around him. That was a gold mine of opportunity.

Grian paused in the doorway, scanning the supposed-hero up and down, making a show of it. He raised one brow, trying to seem as skeptical as possible. “Right, you and all your poisoned arrows will sweep the citizens of this city off their feet.”

It worked a little *too* well.

“Oh, please!” Blackhole crossed his arms over his chest, leaning in slightly. Grian was suddenly reminded of exactly how imposing the man in front of him could be. “If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t have even bothered with that arrow.”

Grian's eyes widened.

A pit opened in his stomach, cold and dark and unexpected. Vertigo nipped at his heels, spinning against the confines of his mind.

"What?"

Nausea struck him, thick and heavy and *real* as Blackhole's words repeated in his mind. At the same time as they gripped at his heart, they made no sense, failing to fully sink in. Grian needed more context, more confirmation, more understanding of what exactly *he* might have to do with the decision to strike Scar down with a poisoned arrow. He swayed back to lean against the wall, legs shaking beneath him. The vet opened his mouth, but only a small, strangled sound left him.

Blackhole had gone deathly still, posture rigid with visible shock. Slowly, he curled in on himself, a shaky breath reverberating off his modulator. With the noise came the connection of two puzzle pieces clicking together inside the vet's mind, stark and unforgiving. Grian's heart leapt into his throat.

"You weren't supposed to tell me that," he realized aloud. "Were you?"

Blackhole straightened, but a minute passed, and he said nothing. Grian felt bile rise in the back of his throat at the silent confirmation, at what it meant for the level of truth in the scenario.

If the hero had just slipped up about information that the vet was never supposed to know, then it likely wasn't fabricated. Whatever it

implied in a greater context, Blackhole was not lying when he said the poisoned arrow *was* related to Grian to some degree. The question now was *how*.

Grian wanted to grab him by the collar of his jacket and demand an answer, demand elaboration, demand insight. But he couldn't move. He was frozen by the ice that ran through his veins in place of blood. Shock had fully encapsulated his body. Grian was overtaken by the urge to run, to cry, to throw up all at once.

He was caught off guard when a large hand landed on his shoulder. Without a word or a second to prepare, Blackhole shoved him inside the room completely. Grian cried out, ribs shrieking beneath his skin. The vet glanced over his shoulder, clutching at his torso in pain, hoping to receive an explanation for the sudden push. Instead, the door slammed shut in his face.

Blackhole was gone. Grian was alone.

His legs gave out underneath him, and he collapsed. It sent burning pain through his whole body, the kind of thing that made it impossible to move for fear of the flare becoming infinitely worse. His limbs spasmed as it moved from his lungs, along his spine, to the deepest recesses of his heart.

His door did not open again for several hours. When it finally came time for his next visitor to make himself known, Grian didn't immediately notice, too overcome with shock and agony to pick himself up off the floor. It was only as he smelled a new fragrance entering the mix that his attention was drawn away – sweet flowers and pine trees breaking up the musty nothingness of his prison cell.

Curious, Grian's eyes darted towards the door. He expected to see someone opening it, just beginning the process of entering. He was *not*

expecting to come face to face with a man couching behind him mere inches away.

The vet yelped, fumbling and scrambling to get away. Immediately though, his body failed him, causing him to collapse backwards into a heap, clutching at his middle. One piercing yellow eye watched him the entire time, the other hidden by the craggly bark of a tree.

Terra.

Maybe Grian should've been expecting this, given that all the other Gs had taken the time to visit him individually. It was only logical that, eventually, this man would as well. Still, the hero had been entirely silent in his approach. No footsteps, odd breaths, or creaking hinges had alerted him to the fact that there was another presence in the room.

"What are you–? How did you—?" Grian gasped for air, too many questions flipping through his brain at once. He forced himself to settle on, "When did you *get* here?"

Terra hardly reacted to the question, no part of his visible face twitching or blinking in response. He didn't even have the decency to smile about the fear that was plainly written on the vet's expression. If anything, he looked *bored.*

While the vet had been anticipating a modulator that was as haunting as this man's outward appearance, he was not prepared for what Terra actually sounded like when he finally did speak.

"A minute ago," the hero said, and his voice caused Grian to perk up. "I knocked and everything."

His words came out in a completely normal pitch, no reverb or echo or hiss or autotune to distort them. It was as if he weren't wearing a modulator at all — but that *couldn't* be right. Why wouldn't a hero be wearing a device purposely designed to mask their regular voice, especially in front of someone deemed an enemy?

Grian propped himself up on his elbows, simply staring in quiet shock. Terra watched him in return, seeming to prefer the silence. Seconds ticked by without either of them breaking the growing tension. There was no interrogating, threatening, or bland pleasantries. In fact, there was no readable intention in the other man at all.

Uneasiness twisted in the vet's gut. The lack of noise became a suffocating experience, searing his brain and creeping along his skin. He felt like his very soul was on display beneath that one contrasting eye. It was practically inevitable that he'd be the first to break.

"Did you," Grian started, wincing at his own shakiness. "Did you… need something?"

Terra tipped his head to the side. "From you?"

Grian blinked, frowning slightly when there wasn't more added on to the question. Terra's tone was flat, unimpressed, impossible to process fully. The vet felt like he was missing a vital piece of information.

"Uh, yes," he replied slowly, confusion growing. "I assume that's why you came in here. You need something from me, right?"

To his surprise, Terra huffed. It was a quick, bouncing movement that tipped his lips up briefly, before they immediately returned to their

even set.

"No," the hero said. "What I need from you will come later. For now, I'm just here to find out what they see in you."

"What? What do you mean?" Grian sat up straighter. "What *who* sees in me? Are you talking about your teammates?"

For the first time in the several minutes since their interaction began, Terra smiled. The indifference left his expression, replaced by something entirely new. His eye sparkled with a humor that the vet didn't understand.

"Sure, if that's what you want to think," Terra hummed, a little laugh accompanying the comment. Grian stared blankly, unsure how to react. "I wish I could say I'm surprised that you don't know, but I'm not. Figures that she wouldn't talk about me much."

"What? Who?" Grian's mind reeled, trying to keep up, but he was lacking a devastating amount of context. "*Who* wouldn't talk about you much?"

Terra didn't reply, but his smile didn't dim either. He moved, then, rising to his full height. Grian tried not to shrink under the shadow that the new angle cast over him. The hero turned, walking over to the door, and bending to pick something up. When he turned around again, he was holding a tray.

This time around, it looked to be a meal with a bit more sustenance – a ham and cheese sandwich and another glass of water. To add to his shock, there was also a tiny cup containing a little bouquet of orange flowers, though they weren't a species he could name off the top of his head. It seemed like something that might be served with room

service at a hotel, rather than as his second ever meal in captivity.

Grian hadn't noticed that there was food in the room until right at that moment, but now that he'd seen it, he couldn't look away. His stomach rumbled, having exhausted all the energy it gained from the cereal and more than happy to cause a fuss at the idea of there being more to eat.

Unlike Necromancer making him retrieve the tray himself, Terra placed it in front of him. Grian didn't lunge for it, despite how badly he wanted to, watching the other man hesitantly. The hero sat down, crossing his arms over his chest. It seemed as though he had no intention of leaving yet.

Though he was uncomfortable, the vet couldn't deny how his mouth watered at the sight of the sandwich. Even a single bite would do wonders to cure the grumbling of his stomach. Weighing his options, Grian decided there were worse things in life than eating in front of another person, enemy or otherwise.

He picked up the sandwich, inspecting it for any evidence of ill-intent, but found none. Grian took a deep breath, and bit into it. There was nothing special about the taste, but to a starved man, it was enough to bring tears to his eyes. He'd taken three more bites before he could stop himself.

"You know," Terra started, something hidden in his tone. Grian glanced up, and his stomach dropped at the way the other's expression had shifted. That amused smile was wiped clean, the only evidence of emotion on his face being the fire that brimmed in his eye. The temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. "Not answering our questions wasn't the best idea."

Grian swallowed. "What?"

He tasted it then — the slight pang of something not quite right upon his tongue. Adrenaline and fear shot through him, his pulse skyrocketing. He pulled the bread off the sandwich, and dug through the condiments until he found something off. It was small, scattered between a piece of cheese and ham, easily missed if one didn't know to look there. Orange powder had been sprinkled within, flavorless in every way except the after taste.

"Oh God," he whispered. "You drugged me."

"Try not to panic," Terra replied. "They didn't ask me to make a poison this time around. It's only going to put you to sleep."

"What? Poison?" Grian's mind whirled, growing dizzier and dizzier with each passing second. He blinked, horrified to find that black dots had begun to appear in his vision. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Terra plucked the orange flowers from their decorative spot upon the tray. They reacted to his touch by shivering and blooming further. "I think I could've done better, given more time. I don't know the side effects of this one, you see."

A heat started in Grian's gut. A fire spread quickly through his veins. He grunted, breathing picking up. Everything was too hot, too much, too fast. Sweat beaded at his brow, and tears pricked at his eyes. Grian gasped as the scorching warmth burnt through him, sending him sprawling to the floor.

The black spots in his vision increased tenfold, and he felt his consciousness slip from his fingers. Through the blurring and his inner fight to stay up, he thought he saw Terra lean over him.

“Goodnight, Grian. Hopefully, you’ll be more amenable when you wake up.”

Grian passed out completely.

The entranceway was warm when Lizzie stepped through. Soft light came from down the hall, and an even softer humming traveled alongside it. The smell of cookies permeated the air, sweet and rich and fresh out of the oven. She knew that would be the case before she rounded the corner, because this was always the time Joel finished his baking.

She watched him from the threshold of the kitchen. He padded around in his usual green apron, the shade of the fabric matching the streak in his hair, which they’d dyed three months prior on a whim. Every time Lizzie saw it, she was reminded of their quiet giggles as they huddled together in the bathroom, each of them wearing trash bags to keep the dye off their clothes while she worked it into a neat-enough pattern.

He moved with ease these days, navigating her cabinets as though he were the one that had organized them to begin with. Joel’s hobby of baking was a nightly routine whenever he was off work long enough to indulge himself. Often, those days overlapped with his time spent with Lizzie. This was far from the first time she’d come home to delicious sweets lining her countertops or cooling in her fridge.

Not that she minded. There was no better place, in her humble opinion, for a man to be than in front of an oven. The view, even after a year and some change together, stirred butterflies in her stomach. It made her glad to have chosen a house with a large kitchen area, even if it didn’t have the most space elsewhere.

“Chocolate chip tonight?”

Joel startled, nearly dropping the platter of cookies in his hurry to whirl around. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of her, his eyes softening into that lovely shade of fondness that he reserved solely for his girlfriend.

“Welcome home, babe,” he said. “I know they’re basic, but I’m trying a healthier recipe. Not supposed to be as much artificial sugars in this batch. Want a taste?”

“Of course,” she hummed, stepping around the counter to take the platter out of his hands. He didn’t release it so easily, forcing her to hesitate there with a goofy grin on his face. “Right. I knew I was forgetting something.”

She leaned in and kissed him. It was shallow and short, but familiar. Lizzie knew this man well, knew every variation of kiss, and this was simply a greeting. If she wanted more, she could have it after trying his latest treat.

And, most probably, after they’d gotten an unpleasant topic out of the way.

She finally took the tray, setting it down to pick out the perfect starting point. Once Lizzie found that, she bit down into her chosen cookie, eyes closing to fully enjoy the way the chocolate melted upon her tongue. It was smooth and rich, with a slight tang towards the end. Lizzie raised a brow. “I see what you mean about changing the recipe.”

Joel watched her, anticipation sparkling in his gaze. “Is it bad?”

“No, definitely not.”

He slumped, visibly pleased. “Good, good. Those bloody things refused to cook all the way through for the longest time, so I’m glad they came out alright.”

“Well, *you* made them,” Lizzie pointed out. “They were bound to be perfect.”

“Oh, babe,” Joel cooed, slapping a hand over his chest and dramatically batting his lashes. “You’re being nice to me for once! Whatever you’re about to ask, consider me sufficiently buttered up and ready to agree.”

Lizzie laughed at the comment, but a pang of guilt struck her, and her smile failed to reach her eyes. “Actually…”

“Wait, why do you look so down in the dumps?” Joel straightened, mirroring her expression. “Did you seriously want something?”

She saw a flash of pure terror pass over him, his countenance shrinking in a familiar way. Lizzie had seen it do this before over the course of their time on the battlefield as enemies. It was as if she were brandishing her spear, preparing to strike, and he could not decide which part of his body to defend first.

He’d only worn it on one other occasion during their relationship. To see it again now meant he was fearing the worst.

“I’m not going to ask us to take a break,” she added quickly. “I promised you I would never do that again. I was just dealing with… a lot at that point.”

“Oh,” Joel whispered, relaxing a little, though not completely. There remained an ounce of a frown on his lips, and the color hadn’t returned to his cheeks. “What else do you have on your mind?”

Yet another fit of sadness and guilt wracked her. She regretted, then, having had a bite of that cookie. It sat heavily in her stomach, weighed her down, created a weak spot. Lizzie didn’t want him to look at her like that, didn’t want to bring up this topic that might cause tension, didn’t want to disrupt the easy flow they had.

But she was always good at ignoring what she wanted in favor of her team.

Visions of Scar came to her. She saw him sitting alone in the living room of an apartment that wasn’t his, comforting two cats that hadn’t seen their owner in over a week and were now refusing to move off the couch. She saw him hauling himself up the fire escape every night to stare down at the city from the rooftops above, despite how tired it made him. She saw him standing in front of the cork board in the bunker, meticulously circling and crossing out possible locations over and over again.

She saw a man grieving the loss of his partner, and mourning his own inability to keep him safe.

This conversation was non-negotiable, whether it sparked a fight or not. It could be the difference between life or death, between her team’s collapse, or its ultimate revival. It would end their hunt for Grian’s location, or at least bring them significantly closer to finding it.

Even if Scar's pitiful face didn't haunt her every waking hour, Grian's certainly did. Their doctor was a strong-willed man, but Lizzie knew the Gs better than anyone. They were cunning, never above getting their hands dirty to get what they wanted, willing to go so far as to hold someone's entire livelihood over their heads just for a point in their favor if they had to.

He wondered how much torture a regular man could endure before he broke. She knew the answer when it came to another villain, but someone like Grian, who had spirit but no experience, was a factor for which she couldn't account.

Lizzie repressed a shiver at the mere thought of witnessing the eyes of someone who had been through too much. She remembered it well – stuck behind bars, begging for freedom, but unable to reach it without help. She remembered the day those eyes turned on her too – free, and yet still running, searching for a place to rest no matter how demoralizing.

She didn't want that for Grian. She wanted him to remain stupidly stubborn, brash, unafraid of the shadows lurking in the corners of his eyes. She wanted him to remain a citizen, as uninvolved as possible, except for when he chose to join them of his own accord. That choice was everything to her, but with each second that Grian was in the clutches of those horrible heroes, it was becoming less and less likely to remain possible.

"I need your help," Lizzie said, deathly serious. "And not as my boyfriend. As a hero."

Joel's posture tensed. "Is this about your missing doctor?"

She nodded, and he sighed.

“Liz, I told you that I can’t help if you won’t tell me which heroes took him.”

“I can’t give you that information,” Lizzie argued. “You’ll try to take it to your boss and it’ll muddle everything. We’re *so close* to finding him.”

“Well, what *do* you need?” Joel shifted from foot to foot, reaching behind himself to untie and retie his apron multiple times. “You know I’ll do my best to help where I can.”

“You’re not going to like this request,” she forewarned. “Brace yourself.”

Her boyfriend nodded, leaning against the counter in preparation.

Lizzie took a deep breath in, centering herself. Then, she squeezed her eyes shut and blurted, “I need you to tell me the location of every Agency safe house in the city.”

The kitchen fell silent.

One beat passed, then two.

Lizzie stole a peek at her companion’s face, and was not surprised to see that Joel had gone completely still. He didn’t twitch, fidget, blink, or even breathe for a solid thirty seconds. His face was paler than

she'd ever seen it before.

When he finally did exhale, it was long and shaky. Joel had a white-knuckle grip on the countertop.

"You, um," he choked out, voice unsteady. "You know we have safe houses?"

Lizzie frowned. "Uh, yes? We don't know where they are, but we've always known that the heroes had to have *some* sort of failsafe in case of a villain takeover."

"Oh, great. And now you're trying to figure out the location too," Joel muttered, trailing off into a series of nonsensical ramblings. He looked like he was ready to pass out. Lizzie had expected a big reaction, but this was a bit confusing to her.

"Joel?"

She received a wobbly smile. "Yeah, babe?"

"Are you… scared that I'm going to take over the city and use this information against you?"

"What?" Joel made a sound that was probably meant to be a nonchalant *psh,* but was instead closer to the wheezing shriek of a balloon releasing all of its air. "No, why would you say that?"

"You *are,"* Lizzie gasped. "You're *scared* of me!"

“No, really! I’d never be scared of you. Not anymore!” Joel waved his hands desperately, trying to shut her down. “It’s just… I’m not *not* still scared of your teammates.”

“What? Why? They’re perfectly pleasant people,” Lizzie scoffed, offended for a multitude of reasons. “And besides, you *know* we don’t want to take over the city. We became villains to flaunt our sick powers, cause trouble, and have fun. With a little bit of healthy income here and there, we’re practically harmless.”

She was blessed with a mocking eye roll from her boyfriend in return for her comment.

“I don’t think you’re lying about not wanting to take over the city, but the rest of that is totally unbelievable.” Joel leveled her with a playful glare, poking her in the side and startling a laugh from her lips. “I’ve fought you Bamboozlers long enough to know you’re anything but harmless.”

“Ah, you’re no fun,” Lizzie groaned, crossing her arms. “We haven’t even hurt that many people recently!”

Joel nodded along, pursing his lips. “True, civilian casualties and injuries are at an all-time low right now. You said that’s your doctor’s fault, right? Ringmaster doesn’t want to scare him off or something?”

“Mhm, exactly,” Lizzie confirmed. “Which is another good reason why you should tell us about the safe houses. The sooner he’s back, the sooner my buddy stops seeing red.”

She watched the humor leave her boyfriend’s eyes again. “Is he

planning something big?”

Lizzie clamped her mouth shut.

In the back of her mind, she could see Scar’s dull green eyes. If she let herself look at him too closely these days, she almost thought she could see reflections of nightmares within them. Grian’s name was always the first thing on his lips in the morning, and the last thought he had before he passed out from exhaustion in the evenings, but the hours in between were endlessly occupied with cursing the people that took their doctor from them.

“He’s a ticking time bomb,” Lizzie answered honestly. “And I won’t be the one to stop him when he’s finally had enough. We both know I’d be the same way if someone took you.”

A flicker of understanding passed over Joel’s face.

“I know you don’t want to give us the locations, but an innocent man’s life is on the line,” Lizzie reiterated. She took Joel’s hands in hers, ensuring he saw exactly how serious this matter was for the whole of the city. “Should the doctor die during this, I can guarantee the streets will run red with blood.”

He hesitated, opening and closing his mouth several times.

Finally, after several minutes, he sighed, “I could probably give you… some of them.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened, heart soaring. “Really? You’d do that?”

“Yeah, y’know, I’m not too keen on our safe spaces being used for evil deeds by my coworkers,” Joel said, shrugging. “Plus, I like your doctor. He’s the one that got you to tell your teammates about us. You have no idea how much that meant to me.”

“Oh,” Lizzie whispered, swallowing back an overflowing warmth, an undeniable adoration for the man in front of her. “*You* have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I’ll mark some locations I know about on a map, and if those don’t work, I’ll point out a few more,” Joel went on, his smile growing as he saw his girlfriend perking up. “You just have to promise that this betrayal won’t get back to the Agency, and that you won’t use it against us in the future.”

“Deal!” Lizzie laughed, so overwhelmed with joy that she threw herself completely into his arms. He caught her with a practiced ease, squeezing her around the waist and spinning her. “Thank you so much, Joel!”

She pulled away just enough to yank him into a deep kiss, something that was long overdue. Her fingers tangled in his hair, and his hands tightened around her torso.

Joel hummed, melting into her, love bubbling up in the miniscule space between them. Their lips fit against one another with all the perfect chiming of church bells, the marvelous splendor of matching rings, the inevitability of a white dress and black suit. The future sparked in their kiss – intoxicating and constant.

“I love you,” Lizzie whispered against his smile. “I need to call the others.”

“Just give me a few more seconds,” Joel pleaded, breathy and quiet. “They can wait a moment longer.”

She rolled her eyes and let him rekindle their connection.

Soon, Lizzie would be able to enjoy these moments without guilt, stress, or fear. Soon, Lizzie would be able to spend time with her loved ones without worrying that something evil waited around the corner for them. Soon, they would have Grian back, and all would be right with the world.

Grian woke with a start, chest heaving and eyes darting. His throat burned, his whole face was hot, his veins still throbbing with the agony of ingesting something he was never meant to have. The world was distant from him, out of reach for ages after his arrival back inside his body. Nothing was really processed or digested for a while, even though he could tell that something was wrong.

The very first thing he noticed when he could finally calm was the darkness.

The light switch had been flipped off at some point between when Grian had passed out, and when he’d woken up. Not a single thing could be seen besides an endless, perpetual black. With every breath, he took it into his lungs, bathed solely in shadows, stuck in a lightless world at the mercy of those that had plunged him into it.

He moved to stand, to try and start towards where he knew the switch to be, but his movements were stopped by a sudden and familiar tightness that Grian hadn’t noticed before. The failed attempt yanked

uncomfortably at his ribs, causing stars to explode behind his eyelids. He cried out, his own voice echoing back at him through the emptiness of the room. As soon as it ebbed, he tried to take stock of himself.

Grian recognized the indiscriminate grip of handcuffs and ropes, as well as the curving seat of the chair he so dreaded. His wrists were bound behind him once more, feet planted and tied to the legs. He did his best to maintain a level of calm, but his pulse fluttered and panicked, overwhelmed by the return to his worst case scenario.

He did what he could to regulate himself, trying breathing exercises that he might've once done with Scar, but that didn't help. He latched onto his pulse, counting each fluctuating beat of his heart, but all that did was draw his attention to the irregularities. His mind raced and raced, but could not force itself to slow.

Until, finally, there was light. Only a sliver of it from underneath the door, but it meant that someone was there. Someone was coming. Grian braced for Daybreak, Morphling, Necromancer, anyone that might benefit from him being in restraints, but no one entered.

Then, he heard it. There was a sound at the door — not the sort of noise that came from approaching footsteps or a key being inserted into the lock. It was closer to a tiny, metallic clanking. Again and again, rustling around on the other side of the door. Grian frowned, not entirely sure what could be going on.

He startled as a loud shout echoed from the other room. There was a shuffling of feet, multiple pairs of them, and Grian watched shadows dance through the crack in the door. It was not enough to understand, but he could make out grunting, cries of pain, and the collapse of at least one person upon the ground. There was a *fight* going on out there, he realized, breath hitching in his throat.

The noises ceased all at once. The knob turned. The door swung open.

Grian blinked back the rush of light that rushed through the room, and through the haze in his vision, he saw a silhouette. The form sprinted towards him, nothing more than a blur of movement in his already disoriented world view.

Only once the individual knelt in front of him, causing the light to cast a semblance of clarity over his features, did Grian truly understand what he was seeing.

A gas mask, red and blue costume, slicked back hair, beautiful green eyes.

“Hello there.”

It was *Scar*.

Scar was there, looking up at him, dressed in his usual Ringmaster attire. He’d come for him. Grian was going to be rescued.

The vet made a strangled sound, tongue too numb to move and lungs too full to breathe. He strained against his bindings, longing to reach out, to touch Scar’s face, to prove to himself that this was real, but he couldn’t budge.

“Oh,” came that familiar, albeit distorted tone. Scar’s eyes darted down to the ropes and handcuffs. “Let me get rid of that.”

Grian stared down in awe at the other man — his partner, the only

person he'd ever loved. Scar focused heavily on undoing the ropes. Relief gathered into tears in the vet's eyes, muddying his view, but he couldn't make himself stop.

"You're here," he croaked, soft and shaky and broken up by the first sob of an undoubted many to come. "You're *here."*

Scar paused to chuckle a little. "I am. I'm sorry it took me so long."

Then, he turned his eyes back to his work. Grian wished he would look up again. He wanted to see the other smile, wanted to reach out and kiss his face, wanted to hold his partner in his arms more than anything in the world.

He wanted to call out his name, just to fawn over the way his countenance would light up, as it always did when the vet spoke to him with familiarity. Grian was close, opening his mouth, beginning to form the syllables on his tongue, but he stopped himself.

There were cameras still. They weren't home free yet, so until they were, Grian wouldn't be able to refer to him that way.

Scar was working diligently, though, to get the ropes undone. He finished untying the first leg, moving onto the second. Grian tried to get ahold of himself, glancing up and out the door. To his surprise, he saw bodies on the ground, some of them splayed just out of view while still being recognizable. Necromancer's limp arm was off to one side, and Morphling's staff was held in an unmoving grip.

He drew in a sharp breath. "Did you—?"

Scar followed his line of sight, and nodded. “Yeah, they’re knocked out. Boogeyman is fighting Blackhole and Daybreak on the east side of the building, and Eclipse is having her usual feud with Terra. You know how she is.”

Grian’s brain hit a blockade. “Sorry, what? Her *feud* with *Terra?”*

Scar’s brows furrowed, and he stopped to glance up at the vet. “Have I never told you about that?”

“Uh,” Grian trailed off. “No, you haven’t.”

“Yeah, they’ve got, like, a rivalry or whatever,” the other sighed. Then, without further elaboration, he finished untying the last rope. Scar shuffled around to the back of the chair, beginning to fidget with the cuffs. He must’ve gotten a key off one of the Gs, because Grian could hear it clinking around. “I see you’ve got some bruises. Did they make you tell them anything important?”

The vet blinked, not expecting a question like that. “Oh, uh… Not really.”

“Good, great,” Scar hummed. The cuffs came undone and Grian pulled his hands around to the front, rubbing at the redness there. “Before we get going, what *did* you tell them?”

“Not a lot,” Grian repeated. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, if they know stuff, I should probably be aware,” Scar told him, coming into view again, crouched at the vet’s side. “It’s alright if you *did* spill the beans. I’ll just have to… y’know… on our way out.”

Grian raised a brow. *“Y’know?”*

“Yeah, y’know.” Scar raised a finger and dragged it in a line across his throat. “That.”

“Are you talking about *killing* them?” Grian’s jaw dropped open, eyes narrowing. “In front of me?”

“In front of you?” Scar seemed taken aback, blinking rapidly. Quietly, almost inaudibly, he whispered, “Do I not do that?”

The vet couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I was under the impression that you weren’t killing people *at all* anymore. Why are you acting so weird?”

Scar simply stared at him, shock evident in his expression. The seconds ticked by, neither of them speaking. Grian lifted a hand, waving it in front of the other’s face, startling him back into the present.

“Wow, my goodness,” Scar finally choked out, clearing his throat. “Sorry, I’m just tired. We’ve spent a lot of time looking for you, and I’ve gotten so little sleep.”

“Uh,” the vet stammered. “Right, yeah.”

“Come on, Grian,” Scar said, rising to his full height and reaching out a hand. “Let’s get you home.”

His green eyes sparkled, narrowing a bit. Grian took in the expression, confusion nipping at the back of his mind. It almost seemed as though Scar was smiling at him, but that couldn't have been right, because he knew Scar's smile better than anything, and it didn't look like this.

The realization struck him a moment later – the reason why the picture in front of him wasn't correct.

There were no laughter lines beside Scar's eyes. There were no crinkles to bring out the amused shine, no markings to show his years of endless joy, almost as though this man had never made those memories at all.

Grian's stomach dropped. The blood drained from his face as his mind made one last connection.

This wasn't Scar.

He was going to be sick.

The person – the *stranger* – in front of him was only acting, impersonating the man he loved. Grian wanted to throw up, pass out, curl up in a hole and never be seen again. Scar stood mere inches away from him, but it wasn't Scar, and he wasn't safe.

He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed sooner.

Grian should've clocked his lack of crutches, or the way he hadn't even seemed winded, despite just finishing a fight. He should've

caught on to his weird choice of words, or the way the impersonator hadn't bothered to ask if Grian was okay. Any multitude of things should've tipped him off to the fact that he wasn't speaking to the one that he loved.

It felt like a betrayal towards himself and Scar at the same time, his world ending with his own perceptive failure. The real Scar was out there, probably pushing himself far too much to find Grian, and here he was, falling for a trick that was barely cohesive in the first place.

Why would the Gs even consider a method like this? For *information?* Were they really willing to dangle his freedom, his love, his life beyond these walls over his head because of *information?*

It made sense, the more he considered what the false Scar had tried to get him to admit — classified details, under the guise of ensuring Grian hadn't tattled. They didn't understand his relationship to the Bamboozlers in the slightest if this was how they'd suspected Scar would behave during a rescue. God, it was disgusting, like someone had spat in his face and left him to die.

"Grian?"

Grian straightened, realizing that he'd gone quiet while the imposter kept his hand outstretched, waiting for him to accept.

What was he supposed to do? Should he play along, or refuse? Who even *was* this behind Scar's mask?

Morphling couldn't turn into humans, as far as Grian was aware. His powers were reserved for animals alone. And this did, to be clear, have to be the result of powers. It was too close to correct to be makeup or a look-alike. None of the Gs had an ability of this variety,

though. So, who was it?

The only person he could come up with that fit those requirements wasn't a hero, or even affiliated with the Gs at all.

Although, as a vigilante, his services *could* be *purchased.*

Grian's eyes widened, taking in the sight of the man he now knew to be Werewolf.

Werewolf, who was not loyal to any one side. Werewolf, who was probably only doing this because he was getting paid. Werewolf, who was the closest to an unbiased party that Grian had seen in days.

A new energy rushed through him. There was a light at the end of the tunnel, a hope for escape even though this wasn't Scar.

He took Werewolf's hand, let himself be pulled to his feet, almost giddy enough at the opportunity to ignore how it strained his ribs.

Before the other could release him, or launch into another overly-loud bit of acting, Grian yanked him closer. The vigilante, still wearing Scar's borrowed eyes, looked surprised by this. The vet didn't give him a chance to recover, lowering his voice and whispering, "You have to help me."

Werewolf blinked. Equally as quietly, he whispered back, "What do you mean? Grian, that's why I'm–"

“No,” Grian cut him off, gaze darting to the doorway, where he was certain Necromancer and Morphling were simply pretending to be unconscious to supervise the interaction. They’d notice if he wasn’t quick. “I need you to help me for real.”

“For real,” Werewolf echoed, blinking rapidly. Recognition dawned on him, and Grian heard him suck in a breath. “You know who I am?”

Grian nodded. “Listen, I don’t know what they told you, but none of it is true. I’m really, honestly just a veterinarian that got caught up in something way out of my league, and now they’re torturing me for information that I don’t have.”

Werewolf looked conflicted, searching Grian’s face with a palpable confusion. “They’re *torturing* you?”

“Yes,” Grian said. He turned so that his arm was visible, the burn mark on full display, and then he lifted his shirt a bit to show off the shade of purple that had taken over his whole stomach. “Please, I’ll do anything. Whatever they’re paying you, I swear that I’ll double it.”

The other man’s eyes remained latched onto the burn, a fresh spark of unreadable emotion converging in his gaze. Then, it rose to a spot slightly higher up, and Grian was able to recognize the flame of unbridled anger lingering there. Werewolf raised a hand very hesitantly, and silently tipped Grian’s chin up.

Though the touch was foreign, and not necessarily welcome, the vet allowed it, because he knew what the vigilante had seen. The scrape on his neck was probably still red and angry, scabbed over or not. Anyone with a trained eye would be able to tell that it wasn’t an accidental cut, too straight and precise to not be from a blade.

Werewolf released him, suddenly stern.

“Answer one question for me, Grian,” he whispered, low and seething. “You made a comment earlier about Ringmaster not killing anymore. Does that have something to do with you?”

Grian froze, drawing in a shaky breath. Then, after only a moment of deliberation, he nodded.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Werewolf declared. “Any person alive that can make a villain as notoriously lethal as Ringmaster spare even a single life does not deserve to be tortured at the hands of the forces of good.”

The vet straightened. “Does that mean you’ll help me?”

Werewolf nodded and began to respond when a sigh suddenly cut through the room. Both of them turned towards the noise, and the vigilante cursed.

Morphling and Necromancer stood in the doorway, weapons in hand, blocking the only exit.

“Getting awfully familiar, aren’t we?” Morphling huffed, “Money can’t buy loyalty, I suppose. A shame.”

Grian glanced back at Werewolf, expecting to see his impression of Scar still standing there. Instead, the man’s form shimmered and fell awake, revealing his true appearance in all its glory. His metallic claws glinted in the light, and his teeth were bared.

“I know you’re desperate to get away from the Agency,” Werewolf growled. “But isn’t this a bit too far? Torturing an innocent civilian?”

“Innocent?” Necromancer clicked their tongue. “This little pest is aiding and abetting the biggest villains in the entire city. He’s the reason they’re always so quick to recover and–”

“I don’t care,” Werewolf interjected. “You lot have gotten away with too much for too long. Step aside, or I’ll tear right through you.”

Necromancer and Morphling shared a look, and the latter began to laugh. “Sure, we’ll step aside. Not sure you’ll like what you find, though.”

Before either Grian or Werewolf could react, they were clearing the doorway to reveal Terra. The hero raised his arm, and the bark that encased it shot out suddenly, far too fast to dodge.

Werewolf swiped at the oncoming roots with his claws, but they split off, wrapping around him so quickly that he barely had time to shout.

They came for Grian next. The vet stumbled back, struggling as the rough bark snaked around his legs and arms, gluing them to his torso. He was fully trapped in a matter of seconds, a crushing pressure squeezing him. Grian gasped and coughed, his ribs and aching limbs revolting entirely.

“You can’t do this!” Werewolf’s voice was strained, like the air was being choked out of him. “If you even think of keeping me trapped here, Audiophile will come looking! We were heroes once too. He’ll know where this place is!”

“Don’t worry,” Morphling hummed. “We’ll send you back to your little guard dog in perfect condition. You just can’t take *him* with you.”

“I won’t give up,” Werewolf hissed. “I’ll come back as many times as it takes–”

“Quiet.”

Werewolf’s mouth fell shut instantly, his face losing all tension. Grian’s head jerked in Necromancer’s direction. She stepped closer, Terra following at their heels. The veiled hero paused a foot away from the vigilante, observing him.

“No,” Grian whispered, throat welling up. “Please.”

His words fell on deaf ears.

“Lose your will to return,” Necromancer commanded. *“Forget your want to help. This is out of your hands.”*

“Wait,” Grian said. Dread pooled in his gut, the reality of what was happening sinking in completely. He grew louder, shouting, “No, no, *no,* wait!”

No one listened. As soon as they’d finished speaking, Necromancer allowed Terra to brush past. He opened his palm to reveal a small pile of orange dust waiting within. Every nerve in Grian’s body burned at the sight, blood rushing to his head. He tried to fight more, but the plants trapping him only tightened as a result.

Terra blew a puff of the strange dust into Werewolf's face. Grian cried out, tears rolling down his cheeks as his ribs shifted, and he watched his sole chance at survival begin to convulse. Bone-chilling grunts of absolute pain ricocheted off the walls in a haunting melody of anguish and fear.

After only a few terrifying seconds, Werewolf fell limp and silent, presumably knocked unconscious.

Grian stared at the unmoving vigilante, a sob punching out of him. As quickly as he'd arrived, his only ally was removed from the equation. It was a cruel twist of fate, like a dagger plunging into his gut again and again. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't find a logical way around this.

"Now, as for you," Morphling began, humor rife in his tone. "It seems we've been too lenient if you think you'll escape so easily. Things will have to change before you wake up."

Even through his agony, he knew what the hero was implying. He saw Terra approach, saw the dust resting in his palm, ready to be utilized a second time. The roots around the vet tightened evermore, squeezing him almost to the point of breaking. Tears blurred Grian's vision, but still, he begged, "No, *please!* Not again!"

Terra paused in front of him, his one visible eye glinting. "Goodnight."

The powder was blown into his face, inhaled in an instant and beginning to work even faster than that. The familiar burning returned, sharp, real, and agonizing. His body shook and spasmed, as if trying to expel it physically. Grian wished unconsciousness would take him already, spare him these moments of pain.

Before it could, however, he heard a final, dying bit of the exchange between his tormentors.

“Let’s move on to the next phase.” Morphling’s voice cut through the silence, chilling compared to the fire that raged within Grian. “It’s time that we put those villains in the ground once and for all.”

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NOT-ACTUALLY-TUESDAY! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR 240K HITS!!! I love and adore you guys so much <333

This chapter took awhile to produce, but with two or three extra days spent on writing, 37.8k words down the drain, loads of support, and only one stray hate comment thrown in there for flavor, I am beyond pleased to finally be able to share this chapter in all its glory with you guys <3 I hope you enjoyed! I know a lot of people were excited over the prospect of a new POV, so I hope this didn't disappoint!

For my readers who are NOT on social media or on my discord, please be aware that my schedule has changed from weekly to bi-weekly, and is subject to change more depending on my real life responsibilities beyond that as well. Summer is over, so I'm going back to being a student, entering into my final year of university, which means I have a lot of work ahead of me. This probably won't change much, but I'll update you if it does.

Extra props to my beta readers, Cody and Smiif, who had to put up with reading an ever-changing forty thousand words several times this week to help me out. They're seriously the coolest people ever, please send them love.

For more updates on my writing process, check me out on twitter or tumblr! To connect more with this community, join my discord server here! I'll see you when I see you!!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

WARNING:

The following chapter depicts more - particularly on a psychological level, but physical as well - struggling on the part of certain characters. As stated last chapter, the negative tags still apply fairly heavily. Remember to take care of yourself first and foremost.

That being said, please enjoy the following chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mumbo?”

Mumbo hummed, averting his gaze away from the computer, where he’d been fixing a few misfiled bits of paperwork. Skizz hovered in the doorway, a furrow to his brows. Today, his scrubs were neon yellow, bright enough to hurt the eyes of any unlucky enough to look in his direction. Mumbo was no exception to this. He recoiled with a mixture of disgust and amusement, raising a hand to block everything but his friend’s head from view.

“Yes, Skizz? What’s so important that you had to try and melt my face off to say it?”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” the other vet huffed, hugging himself protectively. “The dogs love when I wear these.”

“Yeah, I bet they do,” Mumbo said. “It’s the only color they can see. You look like a chew toy. What did you need?”

Skizz grumbled under his breath, but straightened anyway. He pointed

back in the direction of the break room. “Is that container of soup in the fridge yours?”

A gasp left Mumbo and he rushed to stand. “Oh, gosh! My soup!”

He pushed past Skizz in a flurry of limbs and shouted complaints, and hurried down the hall. He’d been fretting all day over other people trying to nab it from him, since the marker they kept back there to label food had died as soon as he’d attempted to write his name. To be questioned about it by Skizz, the person who’d forced them to implement that labeling system in the first place due to his bottomless stomach, did not bode well.

Thankfully, the soup looked untouched. He breathed a sigh of relief, picking it up and cradling it in his arms like a newborn baby. Mumbo vaguely heard the sounds of feet padding into the room, but he didn’t care.

“Seriously?” Skizz clicked his tongue. “Did you *seriously* bring a gallon jug of soup and *not* intend to share?”

Mumbo turned, sticking his tongue out at his companion. It earned him a gasp of offense. “This soup isn’t for *me.”*

Skizz straightened, the irritation leaving him. “Oh. Then, it’s for G-sharp?”

“Yeah, it is,” Mumbo said, setting the jug down on the counter and smiling. “I had to do *something.* He’s been so sick that his boyfriend’s been the one calling out of work for him the entirety of the week. That can’t be fun for either of them to manage alone.”

“You’re right,” the other vet muttered. “Making him soup isn’t a bad shout. I guess you’re leaving to deliver that soon?”

“Yeah, I get off in the next ten minutes for my lunch break,” Mumbo confirmed. “I’ll have just enough to run it over and check up on our little guy before I have to be back.”

“Man, wish I could come too, but I’m too busy,” Skizz sighed. “Even now, I’m hiding from the techs.”

Mumbo’s face dropped into a scowl. “Skizz, go do your job.”

“Fine, fine.” The other raised his hands defensively. “Give the sick guy my best.”

“I will,” Mumbo said. “Go.”

Skizz backed out of the room as slowly as he could. Mumbo heard a gasp from down the hall, and suddenly, the other man was yanked away from the door by the collar of his scrubs. As he was dragged off, the nagging of an annoyed tech echoed through the clinic.

“You can’t just disappear, Doc! We’re *trying* to run a business here and you just wander off to do *God knows* what—“

There was a slam from one of the exam room doors, and the lecture grew muffled. Mumbo shook his head.

Grian was usually the one that handled keeping Skizz on task when he

was around, along with the techs. Mumbo didn't mind taking over from time to time, but scolding people wasn't always his favorite. He preferred to be alone with a research report, or to be fully lost in his responsibilities while checking on the animals in the back. Even amongst the people he knew well, there were topics that took him months to dare to touch.

Grian was impressive in the way that he could flawlessly juggle both the customer service and the medical duties that came with their job. If he hated ignorant pet owners, he could still get through a difficult check-up without running away once. All he'd have to do afterwards to get over the awkward social interaction was complain to one of the other people on shift – usually Mumbo. He had no problem standing firm, staying on task, keeping others from straying in directions he didn't want to go.

Mumbo missed him desperately. The clinic was empty without him, even if he wasn't the only bright personality they employed. It'd been a joy attending med school together, Grian keeping him sane when the rest of the world seemed endlessly heavy, and to be able to continue that friendship together in their own little clinic was perfect.

Eager to see his best friend, and aware there would be no pushback for bending the rules a bit, he opted to leave for lunch early.

Mumbo scooped up his jug of soup and headed towards the door. He did his best to sneak past the room where Skizz was still being lectured, but the bells on the lobby door told on him immediately. He winced as he heard footsteps come around the corner.

"Oh, Mumbo!"

Mumbo glanced over his shoulder. Skizz ran to him, a sheepish smile on his face, likely because of the tech that trailed after him. Mumbo

frowned as a familiar bag was held out.

“Glad I caught you before I forgot. Here!” It was shoved into his arms, the contents clinking and shifting inside. “Give G-man back the tools he left in the autoclave from the night before he got sick. I’m sure he wants them.”

“And there’s a card in there too,” chimed the tech. “Signed by all the staff. Tell him to get well soon.”

“Aw,” Mumbo cooed, melting at that. “That’s so sweet. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.”

They waved him goodbye, and as he tossed one last glance into the clinic, he saw Skizz get dragged into the back again. His whining could be heard for a block afterwards.

The sun was bright through the regular dreary clouds of wintertime. A cold wind blew, but it wasn’t much of a match for a decent coat. Mumbo’s walk to Grian’s apartment, though it was now being made with an extra weight in his arms, was much more pleasant. He couldn’t wait to see the look on his friend’s face when he realized how dearly he was missed. Sick or not, it would be good.

Maybe, if Mumbo presented it correctly, he could make the guy cry. What fun that would be — making the usually-logistical Grian sob like a little baby over how much his friends loved him. More often than not, it was Mumbo who took that particular role. This would give him the opportunity to switch things up.

Mischief brewing in his head, he entered the apartment building and climbed the stairs.

However, nothing was ever as straightforward as he needed it to be.

Mumbo's first road block came in the form of an elderly woman with an oxygen tank. She was blocking the stairs, trying to haul herself and her tank up despite there being a perfectly good elevator on the first floor. As soon as she noticed a fit young man coming up behind her, she begged for his help.

She begged *loudly*.

He suspected that was to stop him from denying her, fearing public scrutiny, but what she didn't know was that he *always* feared public scrutiny.

So, of course, he gave in.

The little old woman made him lug the heavy tank all the way up to her apartment, which was, as it turned out, on the top floor – approximately three floors above where he needed to be. The entire way, she babbled on in that usual grumbly tone that grandparents used to scold the youth.

"Some people these days," she complained. "They don't believe me when I say the mice are taking over, but I know. Oh, I *know."*

"The mice? Really?" Mumbo tried for the most pleasant, engaged tone he could, but he was sure he just sounded out of breath. "I assure you, miss, mice don't have brains large enough to stage a revolution against humans."

She sneered at him through her drooping, wrinkly cheeks. “Yeah? And what are your credentials, Mister Mouse Expert?”

“Oh, uh… I’m a vet.”

“That means nothing to me,” she huffed. “Come back when you’ve had something small enough that you couldn’t see it steal your oxygen tank in the middle of the night. Had to be the mice.”

Though he was not a human physician, he deduced that this old woman was not really all there mentally. Oxygen tanks didn’t just get carried away by invisible forces without explanation, and mice being the cause she’d landed upon simply furthered his point. It helped him get through the interaction to know that she probably wouldn’t remember him afterwards.

They reached the top of the stairs, she led him to her unit, and his jaw dropped at the sight of a perfectly good dolly sitting right next to the woman’s front door. Sensing his surprise, she waved her hands at it.

“I couldn’t get that ole thing up the stairs with my tank on it,” the woman tutted. “I had to bring it in the elevator earlier and then go all the way back down to get the tank. Such a hassle.”

Her eyes brightened beneath her cracked glasses and she pointed inside.

“Hey, you’re a vet! Come, come,” she urged. “You simply *must* help me find where the mice have hidden.”

Mumbo had handed back the tank and left as fast as he could. For all

that he detested being judged by others, getting forced into impromptu work during his lunch break was infinitely worse. He heard her shouting profanities at him as he sprinted down the stairs and to Grian's level.

Then, panting in front of a familiar unit, he encountered his second road block.

It'd been an awfully long time since he'd last visited. Grian was never the type to have people over, friends or otherwise. It was a habit leftover from his younger days, when he'd hole himself up in his dorm room for days without sunshine to study, and he'd consider any visitors an unwelcome distraction. Honestly, with those tendencies, it was a wonder Grian was the more sociable one between the two of them now.

Still, sociable or not, the other vet hadn't ever been fond of people dropping by unannounced. That probably had only become more true in the wake of his sudden illness. Mumbo wasn't entirely sure the door would even be opened should he knock at that moment.

God, how horrid would that be? He'd look like a fool standing in the hallway, holding only a jug of soup and a bag of medical tools, rapping on a door that was certain to never be answered. It was stifling enough that he nearly turned around.

But he remembered the note in the bag, the people back at the clinic, the man that was sick behind this same door. They were relying on him to follow through, to deliver these sentiments that they themselves could not. Mumbo could handle a little bit of embarrassment if it meant passing these things over.

He took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

It was quiet. *Too* quiet. No sick man would've been able to hear it from his bed.

Mumbo raised his hand to knock again, a mere breath away from his knuckles making contact with the wood, when it was suddenly gone. The door swung open, startling a yelp out of the vet. He jumped back, clutching onto Grian's bag and thrusting out the jug of soup as though it were a weapon.

"Um… Hello?"

Mumbo's face paled as he took in the sight of someone that was definitely *not* Grian standing in the threshold of the apartment. This man had lifeless green eyes, messy brown hair framing his scarred face, and a strong build. There was a crutch holding him up, covered by a vast collection of stickers and decorated tape.

The vet froze up, mouth opening and closing uselessly. Shame and fear and anxiety swept over him in a wave of discomfort. He hadn't even *considered* that he might've had the wrong unit number. Mumbo could've sworn this was where Grian lived, but if a stranger was opening the door, there was no denying that he'd screwed up.

The man raised a brow. "Can I help you?"

"No," Mumbo blurted, and then he flushed. "I mean, not really. Oh, gosh. Sorry, I think I got, um, the wrong unit. You see, I was *trying* to visit my friend. He's sick, so I just–"

"Wait a minute, I recognize you," the stranger declared, raising a hand to point at him. His eyes shone. "You're that vet! Mumbo, was it?"

Mumbo frowned. “Uh, how did you–?”

“Grian talks about you all the time,” the man answered quickly. Then, as if regretting his words, a pang of something unreadable passed over his face. The energy left him as quickly as it had arrived.

Despite the weird reaction, Mumbo perked up at the name of his friend. “You know Grian?”

“Hm? Oh, well, of course,” the man said, giving him a weak smile. He extended a hand to shake, and the vet obliged. “My name is Scar. I’m Grian’s boyfriend.”

Mumbo froze mid-handshake, fingers tensing around the other’s knuckles. His back straightened, eyes going wide. “Grian’s boyfriend?”

“Um, yeah?” The man, Scar, tilted his head. “Hasn’t he told you about me?”

Mumbo nodded, but he felt distant and numb, shock taking over. “He has, but I didn’t–! I mean, how could I–?”

“Pardon?” Scar leaned closer, as if their proximity were what was keeping them from understanding one another. Mumbo, meanwhile, found himself using this new opportunity to vigorously scan the person he hadn’t been expecting to ever meet.

For as long as Mumbo had known Grian, which was nearing an *absurd* amount of time, the other hadn’t shown romantic attraction to another

human even once. He may have dated a scattering of folks briefly here and there, but there was a difference between those acquaintances and Scar.

Even in the handful of moments Grian had spent mentioning his partner to Mumbo, his whole countenance had changed. There was a spark in him that hadn't been there before, and a pink to his cheeks that was far too sweet for someone so sharp. It was youthful adoration, the kind of lasting joy that didn't dissipate after one bad date. Scar was nothing like those other passing interests.

He was real. He was ingrained. He was there to stay.

Intimidation rattled through Mumbo's bones, chilling him to his core. This was not because of anything Scar had done, of course, but rather, because of the implications of what was to come – the future that his presence alone could decide.

This was the man for whom his best friend was head over heels. If the stars aligned, this could also be the man with whom Grian might spend the rest of his life. Birthdays, parties, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, baby showers, retirement celebrations – there was a chance that Scar would be there for all of them.

And actually, as far as they knew, this relationship had the possibility to outlast Mumbo and Grian's friendship entirely. Didn't that happen to a lot of married couples? The world changed around them, but they always had each other? Friends were important, but the bonds of a long-term romantic relationship ran deeper, right?

Grian had always been a consistently partnerless weirdo, going hand-in-hand with Mumbo's inability to stand any social interaction for longer than five minutes. Before Scar, before Grian had changed their dynamic forever, there was never anyone closer to the other vet.

Mumbo and Grian were a pair, doomed to die as the bestest of friends, with fifty cats and two doctorates between them.

Now, there was Scar, and Grian seemed like he'd finally found his other half. Even if the other vet insisted that things wouldn't change, that Mumbo would never fall out of his favor, he couldn't *know* that. Mumbo's constantly whirring mind spat out scenario after scenario in which Scar's relationship with Grian outlasted Mumbo's own.

Knowing that there was a chance this could be his first official meeting with the man his best friend might one day marry – the man that might one day *usurp* his title as Grian's number-one bestest friend in the whole wide world – there was suddenly *a lot* of pressure residing upon his shoulders.

"Oh, wait! I remember," Scar gasped, drawing Mumbo out of his downward spiral. "We've met before, actually. I brought my cat, Jellie, to see you a while back."

Mumbo's eyes widened.

Jellie?

Now that he'd mentioned it, that name *was* familiar.

He didn't always remember the details of the pets that came to visit him, but he'd kept that particular day in mind because it was one of Grian's friends. Given the other vet didn't have many of those outside of Mumbo and Skizz, it was a pretty momentous occasion. Though, the experience also partially remained embedded into his subconscious due to his haunting fear that failing to file the paperwork from that examination would result in him losing his job and being forced to leave all of his friends behind.

Such a terrible fate had not befallen him, and it wasn't even close to the first time paperwork had been lost in their office due to some form of negligence, but Mumbo had a great many worries in his life.

The point was that Mumbo remembered Scar – or rather, he remembered the idea of remembering Scar. His face had been a blurry mess in the vet's head for a number of months, only coming back to him now. Alongside that recollection came the memory of him calling the man across from him, *'not his type,'* when Grian had inquired further.

He tried not to wince at the realization that he'd basically called his best friend's future partner unattractive.

"Yes," Mumbo gritted out. "I suppose we have met, haven't we? You've also been the one calling out for Grian, have you not?"

"Uh, yeah… I have," Scar replied, something soft in his tone, though he covered it with a smile. "Well, what brings you here on such short notice?"

"You mentioned over the phone that Grian was in rough shape," Mumbo explained, an ounce of confidence returning to him as he got one step closer to completing his main goal for the day. "I brought him some stuff."

"Oh," Scar whispered, mouth dropping half open in surprise. His eyes locked onto the bag and soup. "You're a really good friend, aren't you? Please, come in."

Scar stepped aside, allowing Mumbo to move past him, which he did

quickly to avoid more awkward standing around.

Now, he'd been to Grian's house before, whether it was ages ago or not. In some ways, the apartment he entered that afternoon was different, and in others, it was exactly the same.

Mumbo recognized the furniture — Grian had originally bought that couch for his dinky apartment off-campus during their last bit of med school, and the armchair was one Skizz had been trying to get rid of three years prior. The difference came in their spacing. Everything had been moved to be more spread apart, with plenty of walking room in between. The wheelchair parked beside the kitchen door, which Mumbo presumed belonged to Scar, was likely the reason for that adjustment.

The blinds were also the same design as Mumbo recalled, but they were shut firmly on that particular day. The only glow in the room came from a solitary lamp beside the television, which buzzed with a vague news program.

The darkness was unsettling for a number of reasons. For one, Grian had never been the type to board himself up in such a way. He'd always loved natural light more than that of a lamp, so to have all of it blocked off in the middle of the day was odd for his tendencies.

Secondly, in the sun's absence, an unpleasant shadow had settled over the room, heavy and foreboding. The spirit of sickness clung to the walls, ceilings, cushions, any nook and cranny around the apartment that it could find. Mumbo got the inexplicable urge to storm over to the windows and throw them open, clearing the air of the horrible energy.

Maybe he'd spent too long staring at the looming shadows, or some sort of expression had come over his face, because Scar felt the need

to explain the atmosphere the second the door was shut. “Grian only wakes up occasionally,” the other hummed. “And when he does, he hates bright lights. Hurts his head.”

“Ah,” Mumbo replied, supposing that to make enough sense. He hadn’t known if Grian was able to move from his bed or not during the height of his ailment, as Scar had described it as something fairly serious. “Does that mean he’s asleep now? Is seeing him off the table?”

Scar leaned further on his crutch, pursing his lips. “I wouldn’t advise you to try to see him even when he is awake. He’s contagious.”

“Really?” Mumbo frowned. “Then, aren’t you worried about catching it?”

The other man’s eyes narrowed slightly, dropping to the soup, seeming to make up his mind about something. He moved past Mumbo to delve further into the house, replying as he walked, “I had this same thing recently, so I probably won’t get it again. Don’t worry too much, though. If I have anything to say about it, soon enough, Grian will be back to living his normal life. It’s an irritating problem, for sure, but it has its solutions.”

“Uh, right, yeah. Grian did mention he was taking care of someone sick,” Mumbo muttered, trailing after him as Scar brought them into the kitchen. Hesitating in the doorway, the vet absorbed the sight of empty tissue boxes stacked up in the wastebasket, and containers of takeout lining the countertops.

“Apologies for the mess,” Scar said, gesturing vaguely at it. “I haven’t had much motivation to cook recently.”

“I get that. I’m not much for cooking myself.” Mumbo held up his jug

of soup. “Good thing I brought this, then.”

“Yeah,” Scar said, smiling and taking it from his hand. He gazed down at the soup like he was on the verge of tears, but after a bout of rapid blinking and a deep breath in, that look vanished. “Thank you. This is really nice.”

While Scar turned to put the jug into the fridge, Mumbo looked around a little more. He spotted a collection of all sorts of papers covering the kitchen table, alongside a map of the city. The other man cursed to himself, trying to find a way to fit the jug in on a shelf that was definitely already too full, unaware of how Mumbo had leaned over and begun to read some of the visible pages.

The first one he spotted was a newspaper clipping, recounting an old interview with Daybreak from a year or so back. Her face was circled with bleeding red ink, as if the hand that had made the mark was pressing too hard in the process. Mumbo could’ve paused to read on, but his eyes were already distracted by another sheet, upon which he saw a printed out article about the weapons used by the Gs.

To his surprise, it was one he’d seen before. Primarily, it was passed around by fans of the hero group. The high definition pictures and specifics within it were hard to find elsewhere on the internet, and people attempting to make costumes or learn more about their favorite heroes needed what this article laid out. It felt strange in the context of Grian’s kitchen table, though.

From what Mumbo was able to scan, the rest of the papers were very similar to the first two – newspapers, interviews, magazines, online forum comments, all printed out and strewn across the surface with various pen markings scrawled on them. Gathered amongst the nearly obsessive mess, the map was the thing most out of place there.

There were circles around certain buildings, some of them overlapping with big scratchy crosses, and others left untouched. The locations were random, unremarkable. One that had been ticked off was a coffee shop not far from where Mumbo lived on second street, with another bearing a similar marking being on the other side of town overtop of a storage unit.

The handwriting for everything, be it newspaper, sticky note, or comments left in the corner of the map, was the same. None of it belonged to Grian.

“Oh, shoot!” Scar rushed towards the table, stepping in front of the vet’s line of sight. “Sorry, I would’ve cleaned if I knew we’d be having a guest, but–”

“What is all that stuff?” Mumbo was too awestruck by the strange collection to worry about the etiquette of being caught staring. Perhaps he should not have pried, but anything involving heroes tended to catch his fancy rather fast, this being no exception. “Are you, like, researching the Gs or something?”

Scar’s face flew through a series of emotions that were hardly readable. Mumbo thought he saw fear, confusion, maybe even anger, but none of them remained long enough to be sure. An uncomfortable neutrality was what finally settled a minute later, and the man across from him nodded. “Yes, you could say that.”

Doing his best to interpret this new defensiveness, Mumbo raised his hands placatingly, worry bubbling in his gut. “Sorry, mate,” he said. “I’m not trying to judge your interests or anything. I’m quite big on the heroes myself, actually.”

Somehow, instead of making things better, Scar seemed to tense even more. “Really? You’re a fan of the heroes?”

“Oh, um,” Mumbo stammered, suddenly feeling judged himself. “Well, not *necessarily*. I pay attention to that general scene as a whole, not the heroes themselves. I’m more of a Bamboozlers fan when it comes down to it.”

That seemed to flip a switch in Scar.

He straightened up so quickly that he seemed to lose balance. In an attempt to recover, he fumbled with his crutch, and ended up just leaning on the kitchen table in an awkward half-stand and half-sit. Scar cleared his throat, tipping his chin up in a way that must’ve been meant to make him seem nonchalant. “The Bamboozlers?”

“Well, yes,” Mumbo chuckled awkwardly, not entirely sure he wanted to go in depth on his hobbies with a man he’d just met. Even Grian was a bit skeptical of this part of his interests, going deadpan and becoming distant anytime the villains were brought up in conversation. “I know they’re not always popular with people, and gosh, I’d never want to *meet* one of them in real life, but you *have* to respect the Bamboozlers. Their stunts and cool heists are mind-blowing.”

“Oh? Really?” Scar’s face became strained, as if he were actively repressing a massive grin. “You think all that about a couple of humble villains?”

Mumbo flushed, embarrassment and shame creeping up his spine. He looked away. “Sorry, I’ll stop boring you with idle pratter. I understand this isn’t most people’s speed.”

“No!”

Mumbo glanced back, surprised by the sheer volume of Scar's outcry. It was the other's turn to grow red.

"I mean," he coughed. "You can talk about it, if you want. I like the Bamboozlers a lot, actually. Way more than these petty heroes."

"Wait," Mumbo muttered, raising a brow. "You do?"

"Oh, yeah," Scar said, puffing up his chest. "Big time. I'd say I know more about them than most people."

A new emotion bloomed in the vet's chest. He stared at the other man, with his big grin and obsessive newspaper clippings, and Mumbo saw part of himself there. He thought of his own late nights spent reviewing news footage of old fights, or browsing through threads on the internet for fresh pictures to be released of his favorite groups.

Grian had never understood, had frowned upon those hobbies, and yet, in his boyfriend, Mumbo found something he could only describe as potential companionship. Anxiety be damned – he would *not* miss his first opportunity to make a connection with another Bamboozlers fan in real life.

They *would* be friends. Mumbo would make sure of that.

Grian had good taste.

"So, uh, tell me," Scar started, barely-contained excitement brimming in his gaze. "What are your favorite Bamboozlers moments?"

“Well,” Mumbo scoffed, brows furrowing. “I think that’s an absolutely preposterous question. I like them all, of course!”

That earned him a small bout of laughter in response. Scar opened his mouth, likely to prompt him again, but a sound from the other room caused him to pause. His face tightened, a shadow falling across his features. Mumbo didn’t hear it at first, but after a moment of listening, he picked up on the buzzing of a newscaster from the television.

“…here today with a member of the Gs for an exclusive *interview–!”*

Mumbo wasn’t able to listen anymore before the temperature of the room seemed to drop. Scar pushed past him, moving with remarkable swiftness and ease, despite his crutch, to hurry into the living room. The vet followed, a bit startled by the sudden change in mood.

By the time he rounded the corner, Scar was already in front of the screen, phone clutched in his hands as he watched with rapt attention. Mumbo stalked closer, curious, and glanced over the other’s shoulder.

To his surprise, Morphling was on screen. The hero was standing with an interviewer on a street corner in front of a park, shoulders back, posture proud, a smile on his face to rival the shining of the sun in the sky. He was always the picture of grace and heroism, even when his actual fights were not the most enjoyable to watch — in Mumbo’s humble, not-at-all biased, opinion.

Perhaps the most jarring thing about seeing him in an interview was how suddenly it had happened. The Gs hadn’t been spotted around town for a while, appearing in short bursts or not at all for a little over a month by then. Patrols that had once been alternated between the city’s biggest heroes seemed to be taken up by mostly just Slayer and Furioso now. It was a statistical anomaly that had been pinpointed by fans of the hero group online, who were known for tracking and

attempting to figure out the schedules of all their favorites by documenting each time they were seen.

Looking at Scar, who hadn't blinked in a solid minute, brows furrowed and mouth slightly parted as if in awe, Mumbo wondered if he was that type of fan.

"Morphling, the people have been curious about the Gs' absence on the scene as of late," the interviewer inquired. She was an older woman with a choppy haircut. *"Are you able to provide some clarity on the situation?"*

Morphling nodded and looked into the camera. *"We are ensuring that our heroes receive a much needed vacation from the stressors of real life after being constantly available all the time."*

"Ah," the interviewer hummed, eyes sparkling like this was some profound reply. *"Heroes have one of the most intense jobs in our city without a doubt, so it's understandable to need a break from that for a while."*

"Have you ever experienced burnout?" Morphling asked her, and the newscaster made a noise of agreement. He addressed the audience again, *"The vets, doctors, first responders of the world have to be constantly available, and they know the struggle that comes with that, which a lot of folks don't always realize. Come, I invite those who don't understand to educate themselves on the intricacies of overworking, so that we can make the world a better place for everyone."*

Next to him, Scar inhaled sharply. The notes app on his phone contained a full transcript of everything that was being said, the other man writing it all down diligently. He turned then, shooting a look at Mumbo, irises clouded with barely-disguised rage. "Nice of him to mention vets, huh?"

“Uh,” Mumbo whispered, acutely aware that the man in front of him didn’t actually want a response. Something about the interview had consumed him completely. “Yeah… Nice of him.”

“A beautiful message,” the woman agreed. *“How do you and your teammates tend to relax in your off time?”*

Morphling gestured to the park behind him. Trees and rolling hills could be seen, with only a couple of taller buildings on the skyline, meaning it was closer to the south side of the city, where industrial districts were separated from suburban housing with green space.

“Here, we enjoy a lot of nature’s beauty as one of our favorite pastimes. In our city, there really are so many relaxing places that go unnoticed,” Morphling said. *“Four days is how long it takes to get through all of our museums alone, did you know that?”*

Every word spoken felt rehearsed, a bit like an advertisement, as if he were being paid to promote whatever amenities their city had to offer. Mumbo had witnessed propaganda of that variety from the Agency before, when they’d previously teamed up with the local government. It was usually done less to convince people from neighboring cities to move in, and more to keep the civilians of such a hectic place content.

As a local himself, though his area was less affected than the downtown or shopping districts tended to be, he knew that living in a city like theirs was not always the easiest. Few other places in the world boasted a population quite as large as that of their home, while also boasting such a big concentration of superpowered individuals.

The Agency kept tight regulations on what could and could not be

known about the process of developing powers entailed, and how they were obtained, so Mumbo didn't have specifics. However, he was able to find out by scouring the internet for hours that, generally, rural areas and cities outside of their own were not typically places where people developed powers. There were outliers, but never enough for people to become heroes or villains. That was a problem unique to them.

Speculation believed it was something in the air, something that grew stronger with each new addition to the hero lineup. Almost as if the longer superpowers were allowed to exist, the more they developed in newer generations – not quite contagious, not quite genetic, but a secret third option that was not revealed to them. It'd been fifty years since the founding of the Agency, and the effects were starting to show in that regard.

Less superpowered individuals were accidentally harming themselves now that they had a free, safe environment in which to practice, even if that came at the cost of being forced to work for the Agency for the rest of their lives. At the very least, from what Mumbo had heard, those whose powers weren't special or strong enough to be turned into heroes – the majority – had a variety of inner departments in which to work.

The Agency was practically the cogs that kept the city running, even on the smallest scale. Minor gifts of healing provided hospitals with easy solutions, and minor plant manipulators could provide farmers with excess seeds to plant each year. There weren't enough people to render any jobs as useless, considering even their high concentration of superpowered individuals still made up a small amount of the population, but they helped.

It was because of resources like those, provided by this mysterious corporate entity, which worked alongside but clearly outranked the power of even the highest government official, that kept their city on the map. Citizens may have their lives impeded on occasion by rogue villains, but they stayed because of the other perks.

Perks that they needed to be reminded about on a regular basis to keep the chances of civil unrest as low as possible. Mumbo found the timing of this particular interview strange, but he wasn't enough of an expert to question that stuff.

Scar, on the other hand, looked like he was comprehending an entire world that Mumbo couldn't see. He was muttering to himself inaudibly, eyes scanning the screen like missing a single detail would kill him, and fingers flying over his keyboard to capture every word said.

"That sounds great, Morphling!" The interviewer beamed, visibly thrilled by how well the entire question process had gone. Heroes weren't always this responsive, whether it was scripted propaganda or not. *"We're happy you and your teammates are getting some much deserved rest, and we're so excited to have you returning soon, completely rejuvenated and ready to protect our city!"*

"Yes, we can't wait," Morphling laughed. His gaze remained unwaveringly focused on the camera, and his smile seemed to sharpen. *"We'll see you soon."*

The television switched to a mindless advertisement. The interview was over.

Scar stared, blinking rapidly as if it were the only thing he knew how to do. Then, he stumbled back a few steps and fell silently onto the couch. Mumbo frowned. "Are you alright, mate?"

"No," Scar whispered, before seeming to catch himself. "I mean, yes. I'm fine. The interview was just… not everything I wanted it to be."

Mumbo glanced between the screen and his new acquaintance quizzically. “What did you… want it to be?”

The other took a deep breath in – something he seemed to do a lot – and thought on his answer. His brows furrowed, and he bit the inside of his cheek in contemplation. Several minutes passed, during which Mumbo thought he might burst into flames from his own anxious worrying, before Scar gave his reply. “I was hoping for a… date on when they’d be… getting back into action. I may not be the biggest fan, but a hero group being on break has been weird for my schedules.”

Mumbo straightened. So, Scar *was* worried about scheduling. He’d been *right.* That made the other man into quite the interesting fan, as all Agency-predictors tended to be. He probably paid closer attention to the news and social media sightings than Mumbo did himself. Having a friend with that kind of knowledge would be unbelievably cool.

Embarrassing as it was, Mumbo had already begun planning how he was going to try and convince Grian to let him hang out with Scar more in the future. Particularly, at a time when everyone was better and they could bond without the barricade of illnesses in the way.

“Well, cheer up, mate,” Mumbo suggested. He moved like he was about to give Scar a playful punch in the arm, but decided against it halfway through and ended up just rubbing the back of his neck. “Sometimes, uh, heroes don’t always give that information away explicitly. You wrote down what he was saying for a reason, right? Check his subtext, see if there’s any secret code. I don’t know, maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Scar raised a brow, eyes sparkling with mirth as the vet finished his statement. “You were thinking there would be an encoded message too?”

“Oh, um, I guess.” Mumbo flushed, looking away. He hadn’t *intended* on indulging his conspiratorial side in front of another person, but if he and Scar were already so like-minded as fans to be wondering the same thing, then there probably wasn’t any harm in it. “Just thought… y’know… it’s an odd time for propaganda, right? Usually you only see stuff like that interview after some big villain fight.”

“Exactly right.” Scar’s lips tipped up into a large grin. “Grian wasn’t lying when he told me you were stupidly smart. I’m glad he has a friend that’s as aware as this.”

Mumbo felt his chest swell with pride, and he chuckled to himself. “Oh, gosh. I’m flattered, really.”

The other regarded him for a moment in silence, and then shifted over on the couch, patting the cushion next to him. “In fact, come here. I have a theory, and I want to see if it makes sense. Grian said you have a good memory. Can you double-check that I wrote everything down exactly the way Morphling said it?”

Mumbo stifled a gasp, practically tripping over himself to fall upon the spot where Scar had directed him to sit. Once he was there, he nodded, beyond overjoyed. Scar passed him the phone, where the transcribed message had been written out.

The vet centered himself, and began work. Editing was not hard at all. It seemed Scar had a bit of an issue with minor spelling mistakes, and had remembered a few of the words incorrectly, but nothing was too much different.

“That does help quite a bit,” Scar marveled as the phone was passed back. Mumbo watched him type out a few keywords, making minor

adjustments here and there, though it seemed relatively straightforward. “Got it. The first word of every sentence creates a new sentence, with a few exceptions just to have it make total sense.”

The screen was tipped his way, and Mumbo read the new message:

WE HAVE… COME HERE IN FOUR DAYS.

“Hm,” he hummed, brows furrowing. “There’s a bit missing in the middle that you haven’t added. What do they have, exactly?”

“Oh, um,” Scar laughed awkwardly. “That’s the part in the interview where he lists off a bunch of professions, so I wasn’t sure which one was right, if any of them, or what it might mean. It’s not an exact science, my theorizing.”

“Ah, right,” Mumbo sighed. “Well, it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with when they’ll be back on the scene. What do you think it is, then? A message for someone?”

“Probably,” Scar confirmed, lips twitching. “And I’ll bet the person they’re speaking to knows exactly what or *who* they have.”

Mumbo didn’t really love the way he’d phrased that. There was an implication in it, impossible to to miss, suggesting something sinister afoot. “Do you think that Morphling is talking about… a hostage?”

Scar shot him a look, brief but cold, and Mumbo knew he was correct in his assumption.

“Why would they–?”

An alarm blared from one of the pockets of his scrubs, startling both men present in the room. Mumbo rushed to pull out his phone and silence the noise, though there was no ignoring what it meant. He jumped to his feet, eyes wide.

“Oh, gosh,” he stammered. “I’m supposed to be back at the clinic in ten minutes! Sorry, Scar. It was lovely meeting you, but I have to go.”

Scar stood as well, quietly escorting the panicking man to the door. Mumbo couldn’t believe he’d let time get away from him quite this badly. He’d just been so caught up in the conversation and the potential for new friends that he hadn’t thought of his situation.

“It was nice meeting you too,” Scar called after him as he ran out into the hallway and started down the stairs. “Visit anytime!”

Mumbo would absolutely be doing that.

Waking up after being drugged was never comfortable, as Grian was beginning to learn. This time around, though, the sensations that plagued him during his moments spent regaining consciousness were worse than just physical pain. His throat was raw from screaming, cheeks stiffened with dried tears, and mouth agape as though he couldn’t bring himself to close it.

He didn’t care that he woke up in the dark, restrained and cold and sore. He knew what he would’ve found had he been able to see, and he wasn’t certain he could handle it.

An empty room. No heroes, no vigilantes, and certainly no villains to ease his aching loneliness. No one to save him.

Grian had seen a way out, had seen the other side, had tasted freedom, and had it ripped away in the same gasping breath. Little else could compare to a cruelty that severe. He didn't even care that his wrists were bound tighter than before, or that he'd lost all feeling in his legs.

What else was there? Where else could he find more hope to keep going? He wanted to be saved, wanted to be out, but days had to have gone by with no word from anyone but the heroes. He'd put all he had into that one uncertain vigilante, simply because he knew it could be ages before he got such a chance again, only to fail.

Grian guessed he'd been stuck for a week, maybe more, maybe slightly less. His estimation came from his stomach, and its sudden lack of noise. The screaming of his gut, his yearning for food, had disappeared entirely as of late.

Hunger pains were known to, allegedly, lessen after three or four days of fasting. If he factored in the few bits of food he'd been fed not long after arriving, pushing that date back by a bit, closer to over a week had to be right. Not that this was a pleasant estimation. It meant he'd been kidnapped for over a week. It meant he'd been in danger for over a week. It meant he'd been away from Scar for over a week.

Grian knew he was fading when his heart could only give the tiniest lurch. He missed Scar — *God,* he missed Scar — but he was tired and scared and thirsty, and lingering on anything beyond that was hard, most especially in regards to the thirst.

In the days that must've gone by during his multiple bouts of unwilling sleep, water had become a priority above everything else in his brain. Dehydration would kill him faster than the heroes could, at his current rate, and they hadn't exactly been liberally providing it prior to his escape attempt. He didn't imagine that his situation would improve now.

Despite having woken from his dreamless abyss, Grian hadn't moved, so there shouldn't have been much of a difference between his unconscious and conscious states. However, not a few dizzying moments later, the door opened, and he heard Morphling laugh, "You're finally up! We thought you'd sleep forever."

Unfortunately for the hero, the addition of company to his bleak world did nothing to boost Grian's energy levels. He did not raise his head, did not give a reaction. Instead, his dreary eyes focused only on what he could see with his gaze pointed down. His chair, he noticed in the light, had changed slightly.

Now that he spared it some thought, the sensations against his skin were odd. His wrists were not burned by cold metal, nor the twisted material of a rope. His restraints were rough, tight, secure, but not something he recognized. His legs might've been similar, but he could not make the pins and needles go down enough to tell.

The chair itself, especially along what little bits of the legs he could see, was darker, less rigid, jutting out at weird angles. Perhaps it was a strange pattern of shadows made by the man looming in the doorway, but he couldn't be sure.

He was forced out of his pondering by a hand grabbing his chin and yanking his head upwards. His vision swam and his neck hissed against the sudden movement. Grian knew it was Morphling in front of him, but the blue of his hair and the blurry details of his face were the most that could be seen.

“Ugh,” the hero tutted, audibly disgusted. “His lips are so chapped that they’re bleeding. Blackhole, could you—?”

Grian registered a hum from someone further away, and then the whooshing of air.

“Thank you,” Morphling muttered. “Here. Drink. I still need you alive.”

The edge of a glass was pressed against Grian’s bottom lip, jolting him into a slightly higher state of awareness.

Water.

They were offering him *water*.

He allowed Morphling to tip his head back and lift the glass, using all of his remaining energy to swallow when he felt the cool rush of liquid meet his tongue. It was lukewarm with a strange metallic taste, likely from the tap, but after so long, details of that nature could not bother him. Grian had never been so refreshed and overwhelmed by a cup of water before.

The entire glass was downed in mere seconds. He was left panting heavily to make up for not breathing until the contents were drained. Gulping it down so quickly wasn’t wise, he knew that somewhere in his subconscious, but he couldn’t hear that part of himself in the moment.

Still, whether he'd savored every last drop or not, it wasn't enough. He'd been bordering on total dehydration, and it'd take more than a single glass for him to bounce back. He wanted an IV drip, or an entire bucket within which he could shove his face.

"Another."

Morphling's command was directed at Blackhole yet again, and as he'd done before, the teleporting hero disappeared. Were Grian of a sounder mind, he might've been intrigued by the fact that Blackhole was around at all. After he'd spilled his secret, Grian had not seen him again. He would've liked to inquire further on the arrow, further on how *he* could cause something as agonizing as that to come into play.

But he wasn't capable of speech, not yet, and the thought only barely crossed his mind. It was washed away easily by water being pressed against his lips again. Grian tried to drink this cup slower, to avoid overdoing it when his body wasn't used to the sustenance.

Unfortunately, with his hands bound, he wasn't the one in control of the speed at which the glass was tipped upwards, and Morphling did not care to waste more time. Grian coughed when he finished, having been made to swallow far too fast near the end. It irritated his already-upset throat, subsequently pulling his broken rib. At the very least, his mouth had some amount of moisture, and his brain didn't feel like it was on the brink of shutting down anymore.

Obviously, though, that wasn't satisfactory for his captors. They'd burst in most likely with the intent to continue their interrogation. But since Grian was barely mentally present, that plan wouldn't work. Maybe the water would rejuvenate him eventually, but the human body didn't just bounce back from deprivation instantaneously. He got nausea instead as a direct result of the lack of pacing, and he willed himself not to spill the very minimal contents of his stomach.

Morphling released his hold on the vet's chin. Grian was too exhausted to even attempt to stay upright. His head dropped and hung lifelessly from his neck, much to the distaste of the heroes. Quietly, Morphling asked, "Now what?"

"Food, maybe?" Blackhole's voice was the one Grian picked out next. This hero also spoke lowly, as if the two of them were discussing strategies before a battle, but it was hard not to hear with no other noise in the room. "He's looking a little… gaunt."

Was he?

Grian couldn't see himself, could hardly even visualize the picture he must've made. Old scrubs and mussed up hair and tear-streaked skin, all dirtied by time. Sunken cheeks and eyes wouldn't be far-fetched by any means. They'd said his lips were chapped too, bleeding. He ran his tongue along them, and tasted the iron, confirming that to be true.

Slumped in a chair, malnourished and beaten, he saw a reflection of himself in his mind. The mental picture was almost enough to startle a laugh out of him. It looked like something from a movie — some political drama, where interrogation and torture were typical, or a sort of drawn-out horror film with a sadistic, slow killer.

"Sure," Morphling sighed. "Get him a piece of bread, or a couple of crackers. I'm feeling generous."

"Hold on. Remember our end goal. The worse his state, the better it'll look for us later," said a new voice, Daybreak. Grian hadn't realized she was there. "It's why we roughed him up in the first place."

"Look at the guy," Blackhole interjected. "He's half dead. This is *more*

than roughed up enough."

There was a sigh and the clicking of footsteps, as if the hero closest to him were backing towards his teammates again.

"I know," Morphling said. "We probably should've stuck with psychological and outward physical damage. Or maybe saved the stuff that'd knock him out until right before the show."

"Oh, it's not *that* bad. He can recover enough to be interesting for the next four days if we're nice for a bit," Daybreak huffed. "Water, food, and boom! Basically good as new."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd worry about the eating habits of your pets, considering that's all you think it takes to keep something healthy," Morphling said. Though the statement was odd to Grian, it earned him a snort from Daybreak, like this was a joke they'd told many times in the past. "How are they, by the way? You've been here longer than the rest of us. I'm sure you're missing them."

"Fine, fine, and yeah, a little," Daybreak replied, calm and steady. Her voice was nothing like the growling thing that had threatened Grian's life in the past. "Tilly's pups are all growing nicely. The dogsitter sends me pictures every day."

It occurred to Grian then that the heroes were speaking as if he were not present. The flow of their conversation, the casual tones, the lack of intimidation in their every sentence told him all he needed to know about their perception of his state. Otherwise, why would the topic of pets come up so casually in front of someone who should never know such personal details?

Of course, to give them credit where it was not deserved, he had only

been holding onto consciousness a little bit. Everything hurt, his mind spun, and his levels of clarity were best described as questionable. Had he not just woken from what he suspected to be multiple days of drug-induced sleep, maybe he would've had less control over his ability to stay awake.

As it was though, he heard everything. There was a severe lack of context, and his brain wasn't functioning at the capacity necessary for him to connect any dots yet, but digesting whatever information he could now might prove useful later. He still didn't know their plans for him or for the Bamboozlers, nor why they were suddenly so divisive on their individual methods of causing him pain. He'd thought he was being tortured for information, but with the way they were arguing, there was probably more to it than that.

"Aw, I forgot she had puppies! Congrats, dude," Blackhole chuckled. "You're, like, a grandma or whatever!"

"I can't wait to go back and see them," Daybreak sighed dreamily. "Just four more days."

Morphling gave a disapproving hum. "Not quite, remember? Sure, you can go home after our little show, but then we'll have to deal with all the meetings and paperwork to get our licenses finalized. We're never going to have free time because of that."

"Big boss lady ain't gonna be happy," Blackhole agreed, clicking his tongue. "But we'll convince her to sign, no problem. She won't be able to turn us down or brush us off anymore."

Four days? Big boss lady? Were they referring to the Watcher?

Grian strained his ears, hoping they'd let just the slightest bit more

slip. He had a worrying hunch that the countdown indicated the climax of whatever they'd been planning, especially with how they were talking about it. That didn't tell him specifics, though. He needed to figure out just a bit more, get those last few puzzle pieces, get into their heads…

And then, what?

What would he do with knowledge of their plans? He couldn't run, or get a message out into the world to warn the Bamboozlers, so what was the point of wanting to know at all?

Maybe it was just his crippling terror at the subject of the unknown – the idea that something massive was happening right out of his line of sight. He was instrumental in some uncertain dealings at the hands of the Gs, and yet, he didn't have a single inkling as to what that was. The vet wished his mind would stop being fuzzy and help him put pieces together.

Without warning, a hand nudged his shoulder, nearly startling Grian into revealing himself. He was able to bite the inside of his cheek just in time to keep from physically jumping.

"He's definitely out for the count," Blackhole grunted from somewhere off to the side. He must've teleported while the vet was clumsily attempting to brainstorm. "Should I still grab some bread?"

God, bread sounded amazing. Grian's stomach, while mostly quiet, was not afraid to kickstart its aching when reminded of its own emptiness.

"Might as well," Morphling replied. "I can probably zap him awake if absolutely necessary. That adrenaline will keep him up long enough to

eat.”

Grian’s gut churned with something besides hunger, and he bit his own tongue to keep from making a noise of displeasure. His arm buzzed from the mere mention of being shocked, not keen on going through that again.

He listened closely for the *whoosh* of air, indicating Blackhole had teleported in and out of the room. Grian willed himself to regain some amount of energy, pushing through his fatigue, nausea, dehydration in gradual increments. He closed his eyes, waiting for Morphling to take him by the chin again, so that he could appear to be jarred awake by the movement.

Grian emphasized the lethargic nature of his blinking, though it wasn’t hard. The light coming in from behind the heroes was sharp against his eyelids, spiking into a headache with impressive swiftness. The scrunch of his nose and the shifting to get away was real on his part.

Morphling adjusted his grip in response, squeezing both of Grian’s cheeks with a bruising tightness. “Morning, sunshine. Hope you’re feeling up for a meal.”

The vet wasn’t certain what he was expecting, but it was not for a bread roll to be shoved in his mouth tactlessly. He bit down, wincing at the stress upon his tender gums and the stale roughness of its crust. For all that Blackhole had seemed intent on giving him some amount of food, his cares obviously stopped at the quality that was being provided.

They did not untie his hands, or give him time to eat slowly. Morphling made him take a bite, pulled away, and then shoved it back into his mouth after only a moment of hesitation. Exactly as he had done with the water, did not let him pace himself. The bread was dry

and scratched his throat, teeth unused to the pressure of chewing, especially with how quickly he was being made to do it.

By the time he was done and Morphling had released his grip, Grian could only slump over. He was out of breath, out of energy, and uncomfortably nauseous.

The logical part of himself, which knew the appropriate methods of reintroducing nutrients to oneself should they be in a position of starvation or dehydration, was helpless to stop the onslaught of wrongness that filled him now. Minutes should've stretched out between each sip of water and each bite of food, and yet he was finished instantly, and made to deal with the consequences.

Needless to say, he was awake. Not running at full capacity, far from it, but awake. His eyes were open, his neck was supporting the weight of his head, his face was curling in disgust, and that seemed to be enough for the heroes. Morphling sneered, eyes narrowed behind his mask. “Feeling better yet?”

Grian knew it wasn't a serious question, knew that the hero wasn't expecting an answer, but a jolt shot up his spine all the same. Every second of hesitation that passed caused dread to build in his gut. His mouth opened and closed, unable to croak out a single, coherent word. He *couldn't* answer though. No matter how much water he'd ingested, his throat was too raw, in too bad of shape.

He winced at his own silence, as if it would be accompanied by some sort of physical punishment should he fail to answer right away. Then, Grian was flooded with shame and anger, despising his own instinctual reactions for giving in to their conditioning. Morphling watched him cycle through this series of emotions with a sickening delight.

“Good,” he huffed, clearly pleased with himself. Morphling straightened and rested his hands on his hips. “We just stopped by to let you know that our plan is in motion, and it’s all thanks to you.”

Grian tensed, eyes widening. This was the first time anything related to a plan had been explicitly mentioned to him. He opened his mouth, willed himself to inquire further, but all that emerged was a broken wheeze.

“Poor little vet,” Morphling tutted. “I’m sure you’re very curious about what we have in store for your pack of criminals, aren’t you?”

As easily as that, the one bit of information Grian had been dying to know was offered to him.

Morphling dangled the topic in front of the vet’s face like a piece of meat to a starving beast. Perhaps that was how he viewed Grian – mangy, disorderly, with motivations and behaviors he didn’t understand. Maybe this room where he was being kept was a zoo to the heroes, where they could come in, flaunt their freedom, and look down upon him from their viewing decks, like false idols upon pedestals of their own design.

That was what they were to him, at least – false idols. They saw the world through their own conceited lens, and even the kindest among them was blinded by ambition. Morphling with his ego, Daybreak with her wrath, Blackhole with his deceit, and the other two, whose presence cast a shadow through the room despite their active absence. They were uniquely cruel, almost to a fault. If he played his cards right, rolled over and gave them the entertainment they craved, they might eventually throw enough scraps to constitute an entire meal’s worth of valuable information.

So, as much as it pained him to give them even the slightest

acknowledgements, Grian nodded. He let his desperation bleed through the crevices of his expression, shuddered in time with the pangs of fear that enveloped him, let himself look exactly as pathetic as they wished him to be constantly.

Grian got more than he ever could've expected.

His vision was still blurred around the edges, adjusting slowly, but he was certain he would see the grin spreading across Morphling's lips in his nightmares for years to come.

"We're going to be the first heroes since the Agency's founding to finally eliminate the Bamboozlers." He leaned down, letting his face hover inches away from the vet's so he could watch the words leave his lips. "And it's only possible because of you."

Grian's heart dropped.

"We should be thanking you, really," Morphling hummed. He tipped his head to the side, teeth far too sharp from this new angle. "If Ringmaster had been killed by that arrow in his side, that really would've been it for us. It's much safer to take out all three Bamboozlers at once. An oversight on our parts almost did us in. Now, thanks to you, we won't fail again."

The world fell upon his shoulders in a single heavy second. Crushing pressure threatened to tip him over, despite his restraints, despite his pain, despite the piercing gazes holding him upright.

What was Morphling *talking* about? Why had he brought up the first time Grian met Scar? What did an arrow shot by Slayer have to do with the Gs?

His eyes darted to Blackhole, whose head was turned away.

Was this somehow related to what he had told the vet so many days ago? Was this what Blackhole had meant when he'd said the poison was Grian's fault? Was he implying that they only went to such terrifying lengths because their original attempt — something he did not yet fully understand — was thwarted?

Or rather, was it the nature in which he'd put an end to it that drove them to these lengths? Was the real implication that Grian's medical involvement meant every injury had to be worse, every shot had to land, every plan needed to be foolproof?

Nothing was certain with the way they danced around the whole truth, but it opened a pit in his gut that would not close. He felt himself crack just that slightest bit more, the unknowing curling into a ball of horrific curiosity within him.

"Don't give him all the credit," Blackhole muttered. "Terra told us not to go the framing route. We didn't listen."

"Yes, well," Morphling huffed. "He has a lot of contrary ideas, doesn't he? How were we supposed to know this one was not grounded in his… distaste?"

Blackhole let his shoulders drop with a large sigh, relenting. Morphling must've said something known to be true, but it meant very little to Grian, which was probably the point of his vague wording. Not that any amount more of specifics could've caught him up to what seemed to be a much larger issue, if the slight frown on Morphling's lips were any indication. The vet already had very little insider background on Terra's character. How he fit into this dynamic was

lost to someone like Grian.

Mumbo would've been able to tell him everything instantly. He missed Mumbo.

"Oh, dear." Morphling feigned a pout, propping his chin on his hand. "What's got you looking so sad, little vet? Are you upset that your criminal friends will be dead in a matter of days?"

Grian gritted his teeth to repress his wince, but he could not stop how the comment reached the deepest parts of his mind.

He saw a picture of Scar, clear as day, paler than any human should've been able to get. In this vision, blood coated his clothing, his skin, and dripped from his smile, while he lay cold and motionless upon the ground.

Dead.

The vet hated how easily he could conjure an image of the man he loved anywhere near such a lifeless state. Weeks of poison wreaking havoc through Scar's body had left Grian with an endless supply of anguish upon which he could draw inspiration now. The Gs wanted to cement those visions into reality, make them irrefutable fact.

Grian had known that. From the moment the Gs had let it slip that they were behind the weapons on the flash drive to some extent, he'd known they wanted his friends dead. Honestly, it was possible he'd known for far longer. There was always the question of their intent when it came to the poisoned arrow, and the harsh way Daybreak spoke about the Bamboozlers in her interview.

Still, no matter how obviously lethal their intent, to hear it directly from their mouths was uncomfortable. Until so recently, these people had been on the side of good, no matter how ambiguous that goodness really was. Yet now, he sat in front of them, breathless, whilst they admitted to their crime willingly.

"It's true," Morphling sighed, theatrically putting his hand to his forehead and biting back a grin. He failed after only a second, and his giddy excitement bubbled to the surface like magma searing the earth to make itself known. "The Bamboozlers will be wiped off the face of the planet, with you as the hook to pull them over the edge, and my favorite part through it all will be their screams."

Grian straightened, a chilling awareness breaking through the remains of the fog in his mind. Morphling leaned in again, patting the vet's cheek with scorching condescension.

"That's right, Doctor," he whispered. "We're gonna make it *hurt."*

Grian reeled back like he'd been slapped, both at the admission and the nickname. Shock shot like adrenaline through his veins, waking up his every muscle, every ache, every itching thought. The jerking motion pulled at his rib, and he flinched.

"What? Did you think we'd make it *quick?"* Morphling laughed, boisterous and mean, head falling backwards to emphasize his delight. "No, not after everything they've done. We've been humiliated, made to look like fools, cast aside by the very Agency that made us into the figures we are, simply because they will not let themselves be caught. I will break every bone in their bodies myself just to let them feel an *ounce* of the weakness they've bestowed upon me."

Morphling ceased his laughing, something dawning on him.

“We could even reuse some of our spare poisoned arrows,” he said, and Grian’s face dropped. “I can’t imagine a better way to spend my day besides watching those three pests writhe in agony while they’re helpless to stop it. If we’re specific with our dosages, we could drag the show out all day long. Doesn’t that sound *lovely?”*

No.

The vet fought against the whirlwind of emotions worming their way into his skull. He was going to be sick. Nausea crawled up his throat, barely able to be swallowed back. Grian took a gasping breath, faltering under the weight in his own chest.

“You… You *can’t—!”* His voice came out as a stammering rasp, razor blades dragging across his throat with every syllable. Grian devolved into a coughing fit. Morphling stood to his full height and stepped back to lean against the wall, seemingly satisfied. Daybreak took his place, waiting only until he’d finished hacking up a lung to grab a fistful of his hair and yank it back.

“I think you’ll find that we *can,”* she said. Despite the harshness of her grip, her expression was relaxed behind her face covering. “And not a soul in this city will have the jurisdiction to stop us. Not after they see what the Bamboozlers have done to a poor, innocent civilian like yourself.”

She released him, shoving so roughly that his neck twinged, and a fierce ache began in his spine. Grian panted through the pain, gaze darting between Morphling and Daybreak desperately. “What… What do you—?”

His throat closed, halting his question before it could be asked, but he

already knew he wouldn't get an answer.

What did she mean? Why wouldn't anyone be able to oppose the murder of the Bamboozlers? Why had Daybreak phrased it like that, like his friends were the ones treating him so horribly?

The last piece fit into place. His puzzle, jagged and uneven, started to make sense.

Cruel methods of torture under the guise of gathering information. Rough physical treatment and deprivation for a number of days. Information slipping from their lips as though they weren't scared of the consequences. Explicitly familiar hatred directed his way at every available opportunity.

The lives of the Bamboozlers were not the only ones at stake.

His heart pounded against his ribs, stomach twisted in knots, head spun with possibilities and realizations. Grian couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't even scream. He was enveloped by panic stronger than any he'd felt before. Black spots filled his vision, reacting in turn with the turbulence inside his skull.

The Gs were going to kill him and frame the Bamboozlers to justify their murder.

The trio of villains had never once been innocent in Grian's eyes. He knew they were capable of horrible things, knew they'd once killed any that got in their way, knew they only stopped because of him, but they did not torture. No matter how often they joked between each other about the topic, there was not a single media report of them dragging out a death for the sake of it.

However, one day, if a man with a clean track record, a loving social circle, and no discernible powers, were to turn up dead, showing signs of long-term abuse in his autopsy and only three suspected perpetrators, the media would report what they saw.

The Bamboozlers would be criminals of the highest degree. They would no longer be seen as having any reservations. They wouldn't be worthy of the mercy of jail time, or rehabilitation. No one would blame the poor heroes that discovered the innocent man's body for going too far in their search for justice.

Their killing of the Bamboozlers wouldn't be seen as a crime, and it was going to be Grian's fault.

The black spots consumed his vision completely. Panic swallowed him into an abyss from which he could not escape. Grian passed out, forgetting his tormentors, his consciousness, his logical thought, and resigning himself entirely to the void behind his eyes. The storm continued to rage despite it. He felt every single second.

The city was cold from above. Winter nipped at exposed skin and burned with its freezing fingers. Joel adjusted the straps of his armor plating for the third time since arriving at their designated meeting spot. They fit horribly with the added padding of his thick sweatshirt underneath.

The Agency's PR team would have his head if they'd found out he was running around in non-uniformed clothing, whether it was cold or otherwise. He could already hear the nagging voice of Gem in his head, *"We literally have winter costumes for this exact purpose. I don't care if you think it looks cheesy. Take off that ridiculous hoodie before*

someone sees you."

But Gem wasn't around now, and though he was still worried about being spotted, it wasn't because of his breach of protocol.

"So stupid," he muttered, breath fanning out around him as he scanned the landscape. Joel already knew he wouldn't find anything there. Famously, no matter how bright the red and blue color scheme seemed up close, the Bamboozlers were never seen until they were upon their targets. "He couldn't have picked a place with some blummin' heating or something?"

"Sorry, hero," said a new voice behind him. Joel whirled around, guard raised instinctually in response to the familiar cadence. His hands fell away from his swords, however, when he saw Boogeyman standing on the other side of the roof. "Next time, I'll make us a reservation at a five-star restaurant. Would that suit your ever-raising standards?"

"Yes, actually," Joel sighed, letting a smile rise to his lips. "It would. You're late, by the way."

"Ah-ah! Villains don't adhere to rules, remember? I am exactly on time." Boogeyman waggled a finger at him, stalking closer. As he neared, Joel could see there was something tucked beneath his arm, similar to what the hero currently held himself. The map was passed his way without any further pleasantries. "Nothing in any of these places, as I'm sure Liz already told you."

It was odd to hear his girlfriend's name echoed off the roughness of a Bamboozler's modulator. Joel was so used to them referring to her by her alias alone, unaware of the deeper relationship between the hero and their teammate, that the familiarity was offputting.

This was yet another thing for Gem to scold him about should she ever be made aware. Dating and fraternizing with the enemy would never be something her high morals could handle, and the thought of her seeing him then was enough to have him repressing a smile.

Gem was the epitome of the perfect hero. She knew the Agency's protocols like the back of her hand, and followed them with ruthless efficiency. In her relentless training to be the best, she'd taken him as a teammate and dragged him to the top of the world alongside her, so that they could be two heroes the city could actually rely upon. Slayer and Furioso — the pillars of justice within the Agency, never faltering, never failing, never coming up short.

She was like a sister to him, the closest to a family he'd ever had, and for a while, they'd been the same in every sense of the word. They shared morals, goals, and a love for the citizens of the city around them, without keeping a single secret from the other.

At some point in the middle, that had changed for him. At some point in the middle, he began to go home every day and just stare blankly up at his ceiling, hating himself for every disorderly beat of his heart. At some point in the middle, that had been overshadowed by the brilliance of pink hair, mischievous smiles, late-night chats when neither was supposed to be seeing the other.

At some point, Joel had gone from a hero that would do anything to protect his city, to a simple, selfish man with only one woman at the forefront of his mind.

Now, he didn't even feel guilty as he passed a new map, detailing five more locations of the Agency's most well-kept secrets, to his enemy.

“She did mention it,” Joel replied. The map was unrolled so the other could take in the new information. “Shame she couldn’t be the one to pick this up today. I haven’t seen her since you guys started getting serious.”

“We’ve *been* serious,” Boogeyman scoffed, not lifting his eyes as he spoke. “But yeah, I’m sure you do miss her. It’s reciprocated or whatever. She’s surveying another possible location right now, otherwise she’d have tackled me to the ground to come in my place. I’m sure you understand.”

Despite the cold in the air, Joel warmed. He nodded. “Yes, I do. Let her know that Meri misses her very much.”

Without skipping a beat, Boogeyman lifted his watch to his mouth and said, “Liz, your boy is with me. He says your dog misses you.”

The hero flushed bright red at the blunt way Boogeyman referred to him. There was a faint buzzing as Joel assumed Boogeyman received a response. Whatever Lizzie was saying to him caused his nose to scrunch beneath his gas mask and his eyes to roll.

“I am *not* saying all that gushy nonsense,” the villain tutted and closed the map, tucking it under his arm again. “You can say that you miss him too, but that is all I’m telling him. The words *‘honey-bear’* will never leave my mouth.”

Joel failed to stifle his snort, drawing Boogeyman’s attention back to him. It was clear he wanted to argue with the hero, but then the woman on the other end of the call was pulling him into their conversation again. They devolved into bickering while Joel amused himself over the simple prospect of Lizzie using a cheesy nickname like ‘honey-bear’ for him – something she had never done before this, so it must’ve only been said to antagonize her friend.

God, he loved her.

"No! You know what? You've *lost* your boyfriend privileges," Boogeyman exclaimed, throwing his arms up into the air. Joel raised a brow, but the volume caused him more stress than the meaning behind his words. He began to scan his surroundings again for anyone that might have heard the outcry. "I'm not going to tell him *anything* you just said… Yeah, that's what you get!"

After a few more minutes of childish back and forth, the man lowered his wrist. The call had seemingly ended, and they were alone on that rooftop.

"I should get going," Joel started, simply so Boogeyman wouldn't have to admit to his want to leave first. "I guess I'll, uh, see you around. Good luck, and let me know if you need more."

"Thanks," Boogeyman replied, trailing off. He cleared his throat, glancing away. "We probably won't. We're close."

That was the most specificity Joel was allowed to have. Aside from Lizzie, none of the Bamboozlers were quite comfortable with this neutrality between themselves and Furioso. He did his best to seem like less of a threat, never reaching for his swords or tightening his posture, but that didn't help Boogeyman regard him in any fonder light.

Perhaps, if they really tried, they'd find some mythical, perfect balance on the edge of evil and good, but that wouldn't be possible for a while yet. They had higher priorities than making friends with him of all people. Fair enough, considering he still worked for the Agency, still worked with the intent of stopping them, still put genuine effort

into arresting any villain that wasn't Lizzie.

Hopefully though, there would come a time when they wouldn't have the Agency as a wall between their two groups, and he would finally be able to look to the future as a solely bright phenomenon. He waited with bated breath.

Joel opened his mouth to reply, to give some witty retort about how he'd figure out all their secrets one day, when his own earpiece buzzed to life.

"Joel?"

It was Gem's voice, rough and groggy, like she'd just woken up.

He winced, reaching up to answer the comm while also whirling around to check for potential danger. "Uh, hey, Slayer. Fancy hearing from you so late at night."

By the time he'd done a full circle, Boogeyman was gone. Whether he'd disappeared off the side of the building, or just faded with his invisibility, that didn't matter. All Joel cared about was the fact that he was functionally alone. He stood up straighter now that it wasn't possible for any ole passerby to expose him for treason.

"Why in the world does your suit tracker say you're out and about?"

His tracker. He'd forgotten she could see that. Joel had thought about turning it off before the meeting, but figured that would be too suspicious, and had arranged a secondary excuse instead. That was what he used to respond to Gem's question then, "I wanted to clear

my head, get some fresh air."

He heard her sigh over their comm, but thankfully, it was not followed by a callout on his bad lying. It wasn't an unbelievable statement. The Agency had been keeping them busy since the Gs took an unexpected vacation — which was *not* something allowed by their contracts. Heroes had to give six months of notice for breaks, and for a five man band to all claim burnout and disappear in a matter of days was unimaginable.

Joel had his theories about the real reasoning behind that group's nonsense, but he kept it to himself for the Bamboozlers' sake.

Either way, it meant that Gem and Joel, as the top two heroes, had picked up a lot of slack. Sometimes that entailed just standing in full-costume in the Agency's press conference halls and answering questions, while others it meant patrolling without possible backup. They were on one of their very short breathers between shifts right then, meaning it wasn't out of the question for him to want to get away.

"Fine, but get back soon," Gem grumbled. He heard shuffling, and the metallic clink that signified she was putting on her own armor plating as they spoke. *"The Watcher's being forced into an impromptu meeting with Mr. Keeper again, and wants us behind her as a show of strength."*

Joel's energy fled at the prospect. He slumped, groaning unabashedly, "What could that old rat need now?"

Not an ounce of him cared that his boss could technically tune into their channel at any time and hear his disappointment. If anything, he thought she might agree with his sentiment. Mr. Keeper was an old, boring man, with fantastical ideas. It'd been several months since his last meeting, but it seemed like he'd finally come crawling back.

“She says he’s been talking about some really worrying stuff,” Gem said, tone grave enough to steal Joel’s irritation and replace it with concern. *“Said he’s giving her a second chance to invest on his weapons before his ‘real supporters’ make her regret not being more open-minded.”*

“Weapons?” Joel furrowed his brows, swallowing against a thickness in his throat. “He’s rambling about those death machines again? Even after she told him to cease all manufacturing?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed. *“Mr. Keeper got a license for weapons manufacturing that the boss can’t fight. Personally, I think it’s just another jab from the Secretary of Defense. He’s still butthurt that our heroes handle everything.”*

Hers was not a farfetched assumption. Gem and Joel had been freshly on the scene together when that rivalry had started between a certain branch of the government and their very own Agency head. It was a petty battle, wholly political and lacking much other substance.

The initiative to train new hires with high potential into perfect heroes and station to any city or post around the country that needed them was just emerging out of the concept stage. One superhero was said to have a more positive effect on a city’s crime rates and social standing than ten regular cops combined ever could. The secretary just didn’t like to accept that there were roles he couldn’t account for with the rise of powers around the world, and that these new forces of justice weren’t under his thumb.

Needless to say, that pest would not be above approving of some corrupt, ultimately harmful weaponry if it got under the Watcher’s skin. Their boss would need as much support as she could get. “I’ll be right there.”

“Alright, bye,” Gem yawned. *“Love you.”*

“Love you too,” Joel replied, and the line went dead. He stretched, preparing for the hike back to HQ, but stopped when his eyes caught on a shadow a few rooftops over. The hero frowned, certain that Boogeyman should’ve been gone by that point. Who was this, then?

The silhouette appeared to be moving in his direction at a hurried pace. He did not call out, not stupid enough to alert an unwanted guest to his presence. Though, with how he’d been yabbering on a second prior, it wouldn’t be surprising if they already knew he was there. Just in case, he gripped the hilt of one of his swords.

Luckily, though, he didn’t have to wonder for long. The newcomer vaulted over a chimney, and in doing so, was framed by the light of a street lamp for long enough to be seen. Joel released some of the tension in his shoulders.

A familiar man closed the distance between them, stopping only a few feet away.

“Audiophile?” Joel sounded surprised even to his own ears, and he was sure his expression mirrored that sentiment. Remembering they were alone, he corrected himself to whisper out a baffled, “Martyn?”

The infamous vigilante was indeed the one standing in front of him. His chest was rising and falling quickly, like he had been running for a long time. Blond hair was strewn over his forehead, skin reddened and sticky with sweat. A green and white costume had been donned without any extra layering, like he’d left in too much of a hurry to shrug on a coat. Even the bandana over his eyes was looser than usual, tied by hasty hands.

It'd been a long time since they'd seen one another. Ex-heroes didn't tend to be too fond of the Agency's dogs, despite the fact that they had been coworkers in the past. To be approached by this man in particular out of the blue did not bode well.

"Thank God," Martyn panted. There wasn't a single hint of his usual charismatic nature, tone flat and countenance grim. "I was beginning to think I'd never run into anyone. I need to have a word with a hero that will actually listen to reason."

Joel tilted his head, confused. "Sorry? Is there something I should know about?"

"Yes," Martyn said, stepping closer and grabbing the hero by the shoulders. "My partner, Ren…"

The vigilante trailed off, as if he couldn't figure out exactly where to begin. His eyes scanned Joel's face, searching for a hint of truth that the hero didn't fully understand. Martyn tightened his hold, knuckles turning white as they bunched into the fabric of Joel's costume. He'd made a decision.

"Ren returned home with quite an interesting story," Martyn stated. "And if you don't want to see this city razed by morning, you're going to want to hear it."

Something was wrong.

He could tell from the moment consciousness dawned upon him once more. The air was *off,* and despite the room being cast in its usual

darkness, he could see a bit of his lap, like there was a small source somewhere. Though, it didn't reach the wall in front of him, not nearly strong or bright enough to manage such a distance.

Blearily curious, Grian let his head lull back on his shoulders, intending to check the ceiling for fissures that hadn't previously been there. The vet bumped against something stiff.

He found the source of the light in the form of one glowing eye peering down at him.

"Hello."

Grian shrieked, head jerking in an attempt to get away, but he was stopped by a hand over his mouth. The firm grip kept him looking up and back at Terra's looming face. The other's hands were freezing, as if he'd been standing in the winter air for hours before entering Grian's prison.

"You're very easily scared, aren't you?"

An astute observation to come from the man with the glowing eye that had been standing just behind his chair in dead silence until a moment prior. Grian would've liked to argue, would've liked to retort that his reaction was perfectly reasonable, but he could do nothing aside from tremble under the weight of the hero's gaze.

The hand left his face, and the eye moved up to look at something further away. Without warning, the lights flicked on, blinding Grian. Through squinted, blurry vision, he caught sight of what seemed to be a vine retracting from a spot by the switch. The plant slithered back towards its owner, being subsumed into the wooden half of Terra's body just as quickly as it had appeared.

The hero rounded the chair to stand in front of the vet, whose ribs were aching from the force of his heavy breathing. From there, he simply resumed his leisurely watching, still enough for Grian to wonder if he'd rooted himself to the ground. Terra did not sway, shift, twitch, or blink. The rise and fall of his chest — the half of it that was human, not covered by his living costume, at least — was the only proof that the hero was alive at all.

"What," Grian started, hesitant to speak but bothered more by the silence than the potential for backlash. "What… are you doing here?"

Terra blinked then, once. In that same instant, the glowing yellow of his eye dissipated slightly. Grian felt the bonds around his torso, wrists, and legs loosen, before falling away completely. He gawked at the hero. Disbelief and confusion at the sudden freedom filtered through him, not quite sure how it had been achieved. With a quick movement, he was able to glance down and watch as his former restraints — now revealed to have been tree roots, explaining their strange texture — disappeared back into two sizable cracks in the floor.

He shivered, both amazed and disturbed by the prospect of somewhat-sentient plants having been the things keeping him in place for so long. Still, same as with the handcuffs and the ropes, they'd chaffed. Grian brought his hands around to his front to rub away the red marks.

"I was sent to check on you," Terra said. "Let's make this quick, shall we?"

As always, his voice was steady and unmodified. Grian wondered if this genuinely was what the guy sounded like out of costume, and if so, why wasn't he worried about his identity being exposed? As far as he knew, the vet was an accomplice to the Bamboozlers. Just

informing them that this hero thought himself too good for a disguise would be enough to doom him. A voice didn't seem like much at first glance, but Grian knew that villains could do a lot more with a lot less.

Maybe this was just his version of being cocky, confident that Grian would never be able to escape and do anything with the knowledge of his civilian voice, but it didn't feel like that. He'd seen what true disdain looked like on Terra's face, back when he'd eaten the poisoned sandwich. It was far from the resting blankness that coated his expression now.

Grian nodded, tapping his feet on the ground several times in an attempt to get blood flow back to them. It did not work as well as he would've liked it to, given his general weakness. The nausea from having been forced to eat and drink too quickly had faded, but with it, so too had the effects of receiving such minimal care after days of nothing. He was better, as evidenced by the fact that he could open his eyes at all, and yet lingering symptoms remained.

His head hurt, limbs felt weak, and he couldn't clench his hands into fists without putting an immense amount of thought into it. Those were just the physical hindrances too. Staring up at Terra presented an entirely new swath of issues. It felt like there were knives against his skin, teeth against his throat, water filling his lungs. Grian did not want to stand, did not want to go with this man, did not even want to be in the *presence* of any member of the Gs now that he knew what they had in store for him.

Maybe that was visible on his face, because Terra sighed, "I tried to tell you."

Hearing this, Grian frowned. "You… what?"

“I *told* you that your purpose would be served later,” Terra replied, a surprisingly biting intonation to his words. “Don’t tell me that you genuinely thought you were here only to answer some questions?”

Vaguely, Grian did recall the hero muttering something like that to him, but it’d been overshadowed by the poisoning that came right after. It hadn’t meant much in the moment, like a lot of what Terra said. The hero was confusing. Dwelling on their singular past conversation left Grian with more questions than answers.

“I don’t…” Grian trailed off, a little taken aback. “I didn’t expect your plans to be… *this* extreme.”

“Hm, sucks,” Terra hummed, returning to his regular disinterested inflection. “I thought your friends would’ve helped you be a little less clueless about our tendencies, but I guess not.”

“Clueless? My friends?” Grian blinked rapidly, at a loss. He supposed that was referencing the Bamboozlers, but he wasn’t sure why the trio of villains would be expected to give him more insight on the Gs. “I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, I know,” Terra said. “But I have faith. You’ll figure it out eventually.”

His eye began to shine again, and Grian felt something brush his ankle. He hissed, jerking away from the root that had begun to grow from the ground. It continued to creep towards him though, and in order to avoid being caught by its reaching grasp, he leapt from his chair. A bad call, on his part, as his legs were not fully awake. He stumbled, nearly falling, but a tight hand latched onto his forearm.

The vet’s ribs pulled and screamed as he was yanked back to an

upright position. The hero kept him in place with a hand on his shoulder, but it did little to comfort the agony that ran hot through his veins.

Grian was so *sick* of this constant pain. He was sick of being kept captive. He was sick of every waking moment being spent wondering what next his tormentors would do to push him to the edge. He was sick of secret plans and puzzles coming together and endless worlds about which he knew nothing.

Mortifying as it was, this little incident caused tears to well up in his eyes, and a sob to escape from his throat. In the process, he found another part of this experience that made him hate the universe just that littlest bit more. The guilt and shame of showing this weakness to one of the people that had hurt him, showing this effect that they had to the tormentor himself, was impossible to ignore. Grian wasn't trained to resist. He didn't have mental walls up in the same way his companions might have in his position. It *hurt* to stay strong. It *hurt* to keep the pain in. It *hurt* to pretend it didn't hurt.

"Come on," Terra said distantly. Grian couldn't really hear him, couldn't really process it, but some part of his mind thought the man's voice had gotten softer. "At least get to the bathroom before you break down on me."

Grian could not move, could not make himself lift one foot up and bring it down again. Everything kept him glued to the floor. He was kidnapped, torn from his partner, his job, his friends, his cats, his life. He was beaten, bloodied, bruised, starved, dehydrated. The bathroom sounded amazing, running water and alone time, but Grian knew what he'd see in the mirror there — a stranger.

He winced as his arm was lifted, Terra tucking it over his shoulder, with the hero's other hand going around Grian's waist. It was uncomfortable, bringing him far too close to a man he hated with his entire heart, but he no longer felt as though he was going to collapse.

A few stumbling steps were taken while the hero adjusted to him, and then they started at a decent pace towards the bathroom. The world beyond the door was exactly as empty as it had always been. Wherever his captors were staying while they dealt with this master plan of theirs, he'd bet it wasn't in this basement level.

While they walked, Grian let himself imagine where they were actually holed up. What conditions were the heroes living in during their plotting sessions? He'd heard that they weren't staying at home from Daybreak's mention of a dogsitter, so were they purposely remaining nearby? Had they checked into hotels? Were there rooms he hadn't seen in this strange complex, enough to house five people?

Did they have soft lighting, warm beds, more food than they could ever dream of eating? Were they able to lounge around and do nothing, or were they as stressed as he constantly had to be? How did they decide who to send to check on Grian? Did they sit on some fluffy sofa somewhere and draw straws? Or did they fight over which lucky soul got the opportunity to run down and mess with their unwilling guest?

"Here."

Grian straightened at the sight of the bathroom door. Terra unwound himself from the vet, and when it was clear he wasn't going to fall over, took a step back.

"I want to give you the usual five minutes," Terra said, gaze dipping down and up again. "Except, I think everything will take you longer than that right now."

The vet didn't have the energy to take offense, though he recognized

the jab subconsciously. Without another word, he pulled himself through the threshold and shut the door.

He was alone.

Finally.

He collapsed against the sink, head bowed to the reflection that flickered out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't a sight he was ready to see just yet, however inevitable this version of himself had become.

Originally, when the torture had begun, he'd worried some part of the experience would stay with him. In his mind, that always manifested as a physical change — trembling hands, burn marks, bags under his eyes. He knew now that those things were minimal. He knew now that it would be the memories of this time that haunted him after this was over, whether that came in the form of his life being cut short too soon, or as apparitions if he managed to keep living.

His fingers tightened on the rim of the sink.

He *had* to keep living.

Not only for himself, but for the people that would go down alongside him if he were to fall. Grian was certain, without a doubt, that Scar was searching for him. He was certain that Scar would continue to search for him for as long as his heart remained beating, that he'd do anything to reunite them safely.

Grian *wasn't* certain what would happen if he died.

Scar would never forgive himself, but his partner wasn't someone who crumbled under pressure from the world. He would always expel that energy outwards, would always keep fighting, stubborn to a fault. And while he was powerful, dangerous, a force all his own, Scar was not infallible.

Grian could not die, and he could not keep still any longer. If he remained in this place, they'd use him as bait, and make a public showing of killing the Bamboozlers. He could not be the reason that future came to pass. He could not be the reason his friends were murdered.

He splashed water on his face, and finally, looked himself in the eye.

His features were sickly. Starvation hadn't begun to show through yet, but there was no color to his skin, and his posture was a hunched thing. His scrubs were splotched with blood and wrinkled beyond the point of salvaging.

Yet, through all the decay of his character, he still saw a flare of forgotten fire in his gaze. It'd dimmed, nearly gone out, but with the fuel of his friends' fates resting on his shoulders, it had found a new life.

He tore his attention away from himself and up to the window above the toilet.

Grian had failed to escape once. Whether this resulted in another failure or not, he wouldn't be able to keep going without knowing he had at least tried every option.

Thinking logically, he considered the chances of him getting another opportunity like this one — in which the person guarding him did not put a time restraint on his trip. Even Blackhole, the self-appointed 'nicest' member of the Gs, had limited him.

Terra was also a good person to have guarding him due to his powers. Manipulation of nature was strong, but it wasn't teleportation, mind control, flight, or the ability to shapeshift. Plants could not follow him at rapid speeds should he escape and have to run. Plants could not command him to return with a few words. Plants could not magically appear in front of his only escape route.

Grian took deep breaths and considered his options. Noise and pain needed to be taken into account if he was going to squeeze himself through that small of a space.

He turned on the sink to its full water pressure, splashing it around a bit to pretend he was washing himself off. Using the sound as cover, he very quietly climbed atop the toilet seat to survey the window again. Through the frosted glass, he saw light, but it wasn't natural – coming from something slightly different, like a street lamp.

That brought him some comfort. It meant that the cover of night would be in his favor if he got out.

The hinges were, as he remembered, rusty. The lock, located off to one side, was in a similar state. Rusty did not mean unusable, though. They weren't completely covered, or else he would've been out of luck. It looked like there was only a light layer of reddish orange around the edges, not over the parts that were necessary for movement.

He pulled at the lock — a simple thing, not reinforced with any particularly special measures, as if the heroes hadn't considered it a

viable escape route. It flicked to the unlocked position with only a mild amount of straining. The click was disguised by the rush of the water, though the opening of the window itself would not be so easy.

Grian took a deep breath, glancing back at the door. He only really had one shot at this specific distraction or else it'd get suspicious. The vet lifted his shoe, placing it tentatively on the handle of the toilet. He counted off in his head, preparing to push, and when he was ready, flushed the toilet.

All at once, while the roar of the water was at its height, he shoved the whole of his weight against the window. It squealed, resisted, and then gave. The old hinges groaned, shivering from the force. Grian bit his tongue to keep from screaming as they suddenly snapped, the entire window coming free of its frame.

He caught the window before it could fall to the ground and shatter. Cold wind rushed in to nip at his uncovered arms and unprepared face. His eyes widened in astonishment.

For the first time in ages, Grian saw the world beyond his prison.

It was an empty parking lot. His window was indeed right at ground level, letting out onto a sidewalk littered with weeds. For a great distance, there was simply pavement, with a smattering of trees. On the horizon, though, there were darkened silhouettes of other buildings. They looked to be packed together more tightly. If he could get beyond that line, Grian would be home free.

He could've started crying again, but he didn't have that kind of time. Terra would be expecting him to finish up soon, so he needed to go *now*.

The vet set the window frame aside and eyed the empty space it had left behind. He was confident he could fit, but it would aggravate his rib. However, when it came down to choosing between death or an irritated injury, it was hardly a competition.

Opting not to waste any more of his valuable seconds, he reached through the window to grab the lip of the stone. Grian got his feet up on the very back of the toilet to give himself a better angle and jumped forward.

Exactly as expected, he landed on his stomach, half of his torso out the window with his legs dangling, and white hot sparks of pain shot through him. All of the weight was directly resting atop the broken rib, breathing becoming a labor unlike any other. His wheezing could probably be heard for miles around.

Grian blinked back tears, getting his elbows onto the pavement. He dragged himself forward once, twice. Out of the corner of his vision, he could see flashing lights, but he couldn't tell if they were on the building behind him or an illusion created by his pain. The winter air numbed the tips of his fingers.

He was so *close.* Just a little further, and his legs would be through. Grian could gather himself, surely, and make a run for it. Even if it was an endeavor powered only by adrenaline and desperation, he would do it.

Through the resounding sting, Grian felt a new sensation. Something soft tickled at the skin of his arms, different from the grazing touch of the breeze or the prickles of revulsion from his body. He glanced down.

The weeds that split through the cracks in the sidewalk had grown up and begun to surround his forearms. Their grip tightened by the

second, attempting to pin him in place.

Grian gasped, wrenching one arm out of their grasp, but the plants were not passive. They jumped up, rapidly growing to grab him again. Their strength rivaled that of a regular human. He fought with all he had, twisting and writhing, but they followed everywhere he tried to go. With his limited movement and his lack of breath, he could not keep up with them.

The last of his energy slipped away.

His arms were pinned to the ground, and he collapsed against the pavement, heaving for breath. Only his feet dangled through the window still. He'd been so near to escape, so near to freedom, so near to getting back to Scar.

But it'd always been an uphill battle. Grian had known from the start, from the very minute his eyes had first taken in the sight of the window, that it wasn't going to be so simple. In his state – deficient in every sense of the word, and broken in ways he'd never before experienced – he never would've made it.

As he stared at the world beyond, head swimming and tears freely flowing, Grian found that he didn't have the heart left to be upset.

Distant footsteps echoed through his skull. Grian turned towards the sound, spotting a familiar, blurry figure approach. Terra was framed by those same flashing lights that the vet had thought were a figment of his imagination before. Instead, it seemed like they were from some sort of board hung above a door. There were giant black letters, but with his eyes refusing to focus, Grian could only make out two of the words before his view was obstructed by the hero: *Now showing…*

He repeated them under his breath, voice hoarse. Terra's shadow blotted out the light of the lamp. Exhausted, he slumped further into the ground. "Please don't drug me again."

"I didn't plan on it. Don't need to overdo it too quickly." Terra matched his level of exhaustion, as if this whole matter was just another on his list of minor annoyances. "You *are* persistent, aren't you? Why? Why won't you give up?"

An image of Scar came to mind. His boyfriend sat on the couch in his apartment, surrounded by cats, wearing the dopiest grin in the world as Grian watched him.

"Don't you know that it hurts more to fight back?" Terra knelt. For a second, he looked sad, but another tear slipped from the vet's eyes, and the view was lost. "Why won't you spare yourself? Why are you so determined to make things worse?"

A second image, this time of all three of his villains gathered in the Bam Bunker's kitchen. It was a memory from long before the poison and the kidnapping. Lizzie and Jimmy were caught in another bickering session, and he was stealing glances at Scar, who stood at the head of the table, gazing lovingly down at his infuriating friends. Their eyes met, and Grian felt that love reach him too, transcending time and space to warm him in the present.

"I have someone I want to see again," Grian whispered. "More than anything."

The hero was silent for several seconds. Then, he sighed, and the plants around Grian shifted. He felt himself get dragged fully through the window. His body was maneuvered around, not gently, but not with the roughness that had become customary for the heroes so far.

Some looping vines came up to wrap themselves around his wrists, binding them in front of him, and the same for his ankles. Lastly, they wound themselves around his face, covering his eyes with large leaves and sprawling stems. Terra got his arms under the vet and lifted him up with little effort.

“Those Bamboozlers of yours,” the hero said. Grian jostled as they began to walk. “They aren’t worth this. The effort on your end, I mean.”

There was a clunk as a door was presumably pushed open. Terra brought him back inside the mysterious prison, cutting them off from the fresh air. Despite the chill, the vet immediately missed it.

Grian considered the words from his captor, but they did little to sway him. “I don’t need to hear that from you. The Gs aren’t any better.”

Whatever response he had anticipated, it was not Terra quietly muttering, “You’re right. They’re worse.”

Grian’s brows furrowed, and he glanced up towards the sound of the other’s voice. The hero did not clarify, but his hold on the vet did tighten slightly. He realized a moment later that this was a warning.

“Terra! What’s that you’ve got there?”

Grian tensed at a new voice, one that chilled him to the bone even without inflections of power.

“Necromancer! How nice to see you up and moving around,” Terra greeted. To the vet’s surprise, his tone rose a few octaves, as if he were putting on a level of charm for his teammate. “I caught our guest sneaking out the bathroom window. Can you believe that?”

“Oh, dear,” Necromancer tutted. Grian remained as still as possible, feeling her gaze on him. “Would you like me to work some magic so you don’t have to carry him all the way?”

Grian bit the inside of his cheek to hold in a shudder of terror.

“Nah, not necessary. He passed out from pain in the process, so he’s no trouble,” Terra said, and while the vet didn’t understand what the hero’s motivation could be for lying to his team, a wave of relief washed over him. “Besides, wouldn’t want you to strain yourself. After Werewolf’s hiccup, you were stuck in bed for days.”

“Hey, be careful what you say,” Necromancer hissed. Grian felt them poke his arm with their finger, as if to gauge for a reaction. After a second of nothing, she seemed to accept the fact that the vet was unresponsive, and released a breath. “Not my fault. It took a lot out of me to ensure he wouldn’t come snooping again. I didn’t expect Werewolf to want to help that badly. He’d only spoken to the guy for, like, three minutes or something.”

“Yeah, crazy,” Terra laughed humorlessly. “Listen, I’ve gotta put Grian back before he wakes up. Morph’s laid out a few of the new weapons in the training room. He wants you to take your pick so you can get used to it in time for the show.”

The two bid farewell to each other, and Grian felt them start walking again. Terra’s grip loosened.

Quietly, so low that Grian almost thought he'd imagined it, he heard the hero say, "They're *so* much worse."

The rest of the walk back to the room was silent. Grian didn't know how to respond, didn't know what questions to ask, couldn't make sense of the situation in the slightest, and Terra seemed content with the lack of conversation.

As soon as they stepped through the door, the plants around Grian's eyes, wrists, and legs withered and fell away. Terra placed him in the chair – the vet was too tired to resist, despite how he hated that stupid seat.

Roots rose from the cracks in the floor again. They had the decency to not be too tight as they pinned him in place, but the damage had been done. It would be awhile before Grian would feel well enough to walk again.

At the very least, though, his mind was still awake. He was able to note the odd way Terra closed the exit, locking it, but remaining inside himself. The hero picked a spot on the ground right beside the door and settled upon the ground there, propped up against the wall. From that new vantage point, he resumed his regular habit of staring blankly.

It was an annoying stare, hollow and yet curious all the same. Every beat of nothing that passed was thick with wondering, suffocatingly unknown to the vet. The worst of his pain having subsided by then, clarity and energy began to filter back in. He was nearly restless when he found himself blurting, "Why are you still here?"

"You want to ask me something," Terra replied, cryptic as ever. "There's something I want you to ask."

Grian frowned. Without fail, he found himself surprised by every word from Terra's lips, like none of them were quite what they should've been. He was oddly calm, but affected too. So much emotion could be read from the neutrality of his face, though Grian felt illiterate when he attempted to make sense of them.

Truthfully, he had a lot of questions. He wanted to know why this whole situation was happening, what did the Gs want, why he was the one in this position, and why could he not seem to get away? Those were the general uncertainties, but there were more if he focused solely on Terra.

Why was he so strange? Why did he keep bringing up the Bamboozlers, and why did it seem different from the way the rest of the Gs talked about them? Why did he sound so sad when he'd helped Grian? Why had he helped Grian to begin with, redirected Necromancer's wrath? Why did it feel like he hated his teammates even more than Grian did?

In the end, though, he could only utter one question. It felt like the only one that mattered. "Who are you?"

Terra smiled.

"They used to call me Locust."

Grian sucked in a breath. "Oh."

He saw him then — that lost figure that'd been forgotten so long ago. Broad shoulders, but a frame that looked like he was primed for movement, much like Lizzie. The plants, whether he utilized tree roots

or vines, those powers of his had not changed. The familiar way he spoke about the Bamboozlers finally found its explanation.

To miss those details that were so obvious now brought a sense of shame down upon him. After such constant stress, Locust had barely crossed his mind since Scar's injury, and even less since his kidnapping, but that had been foolish.

What was he doing here? Why was a former villain living as a hero? Why had he changed his name, his costume, lost that of his spark that Grian had seen in that video so long ago? Why was he, someone that had once been close enough to the Bamboozlers for Lizzie to risk her life rescuing him from jail, opposing them mere years later?

"So, you *do* know who I am," Terra mused, eyes crinkled from the force of his smile. It was bright, glistening like the golden makeup that lined his lashes. He looked like he was back on that city street, laughing as his vines ran his opponents around in circles. "I hadn't expected Liz would ever mention me."

At the sound of Lizzie's name, Grian jolted, whole body going rigid. The roots restraining him tightened momentarily, as if expecting him to try to break free. His eyes darted around to the corners of the room.

"Relax," Terra sighed. "I turned the cameras off before I came in."

Grian's mouth opened and closed as he gawked at the other man. He wasn't sure whether or not that was the truth, but something about the matter-of-fact way Terra said it made that easier to accept. Still, Grian's mind buzzed, half from his remaining exhaustion, and half from unbridled curiosity. "You… What? You know her name? Her real name?"

“I do,” Terra said, tilting his head. “I know Scar and Jimmy’s too.”

A distressed noise punched out of the vet at the sound of those names. Oh *God,* those names. Lizzie, Jimmy, Scar, the people he’d not spoken about aloud in ages for their own protection. He didn’t realize how sweet those syllables would sound after all he’d been through. Terra said them with such ease, like they weren’t priceless jewels, like Grian hadn’t been holding onto them as his last tethers of hope.

“Why?” His throat ached with the singular word that encompassed every question remaining within him. Adrenaline momentarily pushed away the fatigue that lined his bones, if only to allow him to repeat himself louder. *“Why?”*

“Why did they torture you for information that I already know?” Terra finished the question for him, broke it down to its core in only a moment. “Because they couldn’t get it out of me, that’s why. I wouldn’t tell them. No matter how much they shocked me, isolated me, starved me, I wouldn’t tell them.”

Grian’s brows furrowed. “They… did what?”

“The exact same thing they’re doing to you,” Terra said, so casually that Grian thought he’d misheard. “That’s what befriending the Bamboozlers gets you. I thought training with the best, being allied with the most intimidating, putting my everything into being a villain was all it would take to succeed.”

He gestured down at himself, smile falling.

“I was wrong.”

Grian didn't know where to begin processing this. The hero in front of him had been nothing more than a cruel and unusual stranger minutes ago. Now, he looked familiar, like the vet had seen him somewhere before. Specifically, it was his expression that brought a sense of déjà vu.

His own reflection, Grian realized, had been exactly like this. He'd been hollow, near to hopeless, disguising a persistent ache. That was what he saw on Terra's face whenever they spoke.

They were copies of each other, separated only by a few years of differing life experience.

"Why?" Grian was quiet, solemn as he asked, "After all of that, why would you join them?"

At this question, Terra hesitated. His mouth opened, but for several seconds, he seemed to dwell on the answer. Instead of a direct response, when the other finally could drum up the words, they came in the form of an inquiry of his own. "Do you know what happens when a villain gets caught by the Agency?"

The vet shook his head gingerly. He had assumptions, but they were baseless and probably influenced by a lifetime of propaganda.

"It's nothing that you wouldn't expect from a prison. They take your mask off, put your face in their system, use it to document the whole of your civilian identity," Terra told him. "They run a bunch of tests, poking and prodding and talking about you like you're not there. By the end, they have all the information you never wanted them to know."

He swallowed, throat bobbing. Grian watched the movement, fear hot in his gut.

"Then, if you're unlucky," Terra continued, voice steady despite his wavering gaze. "You'll get guards that are willing to look away, and heroes that… *really* want to see inside your skull. Heroes that are obsessed with being at the top, and they think your friends are the key to getting there."

The Gs.

Grian looked down at his lap, unable to maintain eye contact any longer.

"Eventually, Lizzie came for me. Scar and Jimmy liked to say they had no part in it, but I know they ran distraction downtown so there would be less eyes on the prison," Terra went on, huffing out a small laugh in the middle. His tone, however, was far from fond. He sounded bitter, like even saying it out loud put a sour taste in his mouth. "They promised to help me stay out of prison, stay away from the heroes…"

He shuffled, and when Grian chanced a glance over at him, he'd pulled a leg up to his chest.

"But it was too late. They were better villains, didn't have any legal documents to take into account, and they always had each other to fall back on," the hero sighed. "I spent weeks on the run, going from place to place, but the Agency always tracked me down. My face was on wanted posters everywhere. I was totally powerless."

Grian could see it — the panic, the fear, the constant struggle to stay one step ahead of an entity that had connections everywhere. The

Bamboozlers would've tried to hide him in the bunker, but that could only work for so long. Terra would've needed to visit the outside world eventually, and when he did, the Agency would be waiting for him.

"What happened?" Grian sounded meek, pathetic. "How did you become… this?"

"A *hero?"* Terra echoed the word with unparalleled disdain. Nothing he'd muttered before bothered him as much as that one word, that one title. "Necromancer cornered me, gave me an ultimatum. The Gs thought my powers were useful, and knew my track record as a villain. At that point, I'd never… killed anyone. I wasn't as bad as the Bamboozlers, even if we were allies. So, she said that I had two options."

Terra met his gaze. He was stern then, resolute.

"I could either spend the rest of my life running," he whispered. "Or I could join them."

Grian grimaced. A cold quiet fell across the room.

They both knew that an ultimatum of that nature was hardly a choice. Spend eternity checking over his shoulder, or become the people he hated. Neither path was good, but one had a prospect of peace at the end of the suffering, more so than anything the former could offer. Judging by Terra's expression, Grian guessed that peace had not yet been reached.

"Obviously, Lizzie fought me on my decision. Told me I was making a huge mistake, didn't understand when I said she couldn't protect me, and considered it a betrayal like no other," Terra admitted, looking

away. “We haven’t spoken since. I lost my friends and my freedom on the same day.”

With the change in angles, Grian couldn’t catch what expression the hero might’ve been wearing. Yet, there were hints of sadness in his tone, hints of the emotions underneath. Terra *regretted* joining the Agency. Or rather, it hadn’t been his choice to join at all. He hated the Gs, and had the same past with them as Grian was experiencing in the present. Terra was a prisoner too.

Albeit, a prisoner without a cell. His bars came in the form of the rest of the world, the status he had to uphold, the team with which he was forced to align. He didn’t need handcuffs or ropes or a dingy basement to keep him in place, because there was nowhere he could go.

Grian felt a stirring behind his ribs. Through the pain and the failures, a stubborn hope continued to shine.

Terra hated the Gs. Terra didn’t want to be a hero. Terra — *Locust* — had been friends with the Bamboozlers, even if they’d ended on bad terms.

Grian could work with that.

“Have you considered… talking to her again now that so much time has passed?” He tried to be subtle, to approach it gently. “Maybe she’d understand if you explained.”

“No point. If she didn’t completely hate me before, she will soon,” Terra replied, foreboding but resigned. “Besides, the Bamboozlers aren’t people you can just approach. They hold grudges, and only take allies that they know won’t slow them down.”

That yellow eye landed on Grian, scanning him again.

“Makes me wonder why they chose to befriend a powerless nobody like you.”

Grian’s brow twitched at the insult, defensiveness rising inside of him. “Hey, who said I’m powerless? Maybe I’ve got some super cool gift that I just haven’t shown you.”

The hero huffed, “Right. Good one. You expect me to believe you’ve been hanging with those three for so long and you don’t know how powers work?”

“Of course I know how they work,” Grian said, though he faltered under the look he was receiving. “You’re either born with them or you’re not. Pretty simple.”

“I mean, *yeah,* but that’s not all,” Terra said, a confused smile pulling at his lips. “You know about the upkeep, don’t you? It’s why people become villains or heroes in the first place.”

Grian narrowed his eyes. “Upkeep?”

“Oh my… Dude, just, ugh… Here, look,” Terra grumbled. “I’ll explain it.”

He turned to face the vet completely, and held out a hand, specifically the one that was covered by his living costume of plants. In his palm, a flower bloomed, orange petals fresh with new life. The color made

Grian's nose scrunch, but he watched all the same.

"Powers are like this plant. It can grow under the right conditions, and become something super amazing if you give it the right nutrition," Terra started. "You feed it by indulging in it, letting it out for long periods of time as often as you can. Using it in large bursts tends to help way more than just using it daily around the house or something. So, for a villain, a good exercise would be robbing a bank or fighting a hero."

As if to demonstrate this fact, the longer the flower was kept in his palm, the further it seemed to bloom, with leaves even sprouting along its stem.

"But if you neglect it, the power can weaken, until eventually," he said, a petal falling to the floor. Another followed suit. "It dies."

Grian's eyes widened, confusion growing. "What? Powers can die?"

"Yeah," Terra confirmed. "Big time. If you never indulge them, then they can disappear completely. I'm sure there's people in the world that had powers, but didn't find out in time to keep them from disappearing. They develop when you're in your late teens, so most people are too distracted by school and other changes to their bodies to notice stuff like that."

The vet found himself nodding. From his personal experience, his teenage years were spent studying to get into college, and once he was there, studying to get into medical school. Entire months would go by wherein he had done little more than eat, sleep, and read textbooks. He wouldn't have known, or even cared enough to pursue a thing as trivial as powers with his future career on the line.

The vet leaned further against the back of his chair. Now that he'd learned a bit, the most studious part of him longed to ask more questions, delve into how and why processes like that occurred. He didn't give in, of course, because that would've only served to fixate him further on the topic.

Superpowers needed to be upkept. He hadn't anticipated that. Grian could understand, suddenly, why people with them might choose to willingly turn themselves in to the Agency. If they risked losing their gifts completely in an attempt to hide them, then why hide them at all? Not everyone was cut out for a life of villainy, so it was a reasonable alternative.

"Huh," Grian responded simply. "I guess you *do* know that I don't have any."

Terra nodded, closing his hand and sitting back.

"So, what? That's it, then?" The vet steered them expertly in the direction of their earlier conversation once more. "You're just going to let yourself be stuck with the Gs forever? Is that really what you'd want for yourself?"

The hero's shoulders slumped, as though he hadn't been expecting the question. Quietly, he replied, "No."

"Right," Grian said. "Obviously not."

Butterflies of anxiety spiked in his gut. If he worded this wrong, or came on too harshly, the other might not be as willing to help. Still, he had to ask, had to try. This was another open window, and he'd be damned if he didn't at least *attempt* to crawl through it.

“So, why wait?” A golden eye flicked up to Grian as he spoke, something unreadable in it, resembling confusion. “Why be complicit in their plan? Why hurt innocent people — your old friends — just because these horrible heroes want you to? Why not keep fighting?”

Grian swallowed back his fear.

“Help me escape,” he pleaded. “And I’ll make sure you never have to run again.”

Terra froze, lips parting with surprise.

Grian let all of his earnest determination show on his expression. He wanted the hero to see that despite how he was beaten, broken, torn down in every way that mattered, he still wanted to keep going. Neither of them wanted to run, neither of them wanted to die, neither of them wanted to put up with this torment.

Neither of them could overcome it without the other.

Terra stood. He swayed in Grian’s direction, then appeared to hesitate. The plants around the vet’s wrists shifted, though they did not get tighter or looser in any noticeable way. A stormcloud of emotions crossed over the hero’s expression.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, he took a step forward. Then, another. Terra stopped a foot away from the chair. The vet’s heart pounded, breathing quickening.

“Grian,” Terra said.

Grian sat forward. “Yes?”

“I think you’re misunderstanding something.”

The vet blinked. “What do you mean?”

Terra was frowning, eye reflecting a deep sorrow down at him. Grian’s pulse shot up, terribly aware that an expression like this one could only mean bad things. He couldn’t afford to lose Terra’s support here. The hero needed to see his side, or else they’d both be doomed.

“I know you think you have no chance,” Grian blurted. “But I also know what it’s like to be in your place. There’ll be a way to get rid of these problems without trapping ourselves further. If we both escape now, we’ll actually have a chance to figure it out together. You won’t have to keep playing along with this awful plan.”

Terra considered him for a long moment.

Finally, he sighed, and Grian’s arms were shifted in his restraints. The plants separated, keeping hold of both of his wrists but bringing them around to the front. The vet stared, wide eyed, down at his hands.

Had he done it? Was Terra convinced? Could they get out of here? Was the torment over?

“Like I said,” Terra spoke. “I think you’ve misunderstood something,

Grian.”

The vet tensed. Terra’s tone was cold, emotionless. Hatred burned through his iris.

“The Gs didn’t come up with this plan,” the hero whispered. “I did.”

Grian’s stomach dropped. A new wave of dread flooded his stomach, constant and clear, like the clouds accompanying the rain.

He had miscalculated. More than ever before.

“W-What?” He shivered. The roots began to squeeze his arm, their bark cutting into his skin. “But you just… you said that they…”

“I told you I was trapped,” Terra hummed. “Not that I hadn’t thought of a way out.”

Grian shook his head, throat closing. “No…”

What was this change? Why had Terra seemed to become a whole new person in the blink of an eye? How could he say such emotional things to Grian’s face, and then admit to being behind the Gs’ plot? None of that made sense. None of it was possible.

“No, but you… you pitied me, didn’t you? You trusted me with your story. You said you hated the way these heroes worked,” Grian hissed, words boiling in his chest. “How is this–? How could you–?”

“All true statements,” Terra confirmed with a curt nod. “But why do you think I was so willing to spill all my deepest, darkest secrets to you? I wouldn’t do something like that if I expected you’d live long enough to tell anyone.”

“No, that’s not…” Grian’s mind spun, his earlier exertion rearing its ugly head to gnaw at his cognitive function. No matter how he tried, he could not seem to make his point, could not seem to regain the upperhand, could not seem to remember if he’d ever had it to begin with. “You just… a second ago, you helped me avoid Necromancer. Why would you do that if–?”

“Oh, yeah, that? I wasn’t doing it for your sake,” Terra replied, shrugging. “My plan requires Necromancer to be at full strength. I’m not sure if you picked up on it, but their power has a pretty big drawback when it doesn’t work perfectly.”

Grian did not respond. He was stuck staring, perpetual shock coating his features and cutting down to the bone. It must have been mistaken for confusion, because the hero crossed his arms, settling in for another explanation.

“The media seems to mistakenly think she has a time limit and some sort of mind control, but that’s not true at all,” Terra elaborated. “They can manipulate how badly a person wants something. Small things are easy to mess around with, like having you move a certain way, or fire an arrow at a vital point when you were aiming somewhere else.”

Grian saw a vision of a villain in an alleyway, blood soaking through a wound in his side, which would’ve been lethal had qualified help not arrived so swiftly. Such an inexplicably interesting mistake for someone as precise as Slayer to make.

“But when they go for big challenges,” Terra sighed, “Like trying to make you give up information you *really* don’t want her to know…”

The hero smiled. It did not reach his eye.

“The result isn’t pretty.”

Grian remembered the brief sight of blood he’d seen under Necromancer’s veil. That had been shortly after their failed interrogation, in which he had successfully withheld Scar’s name from them. Her passing conversation with Terra a minute ago made sense now too. Werewolf had wanted to help more than expected, she’d said as an explanation for how long they’d been forced to recover.

If he’d discovered this weakness under any other circumstances, he might have been relieved. As it was, Grian had little reason to celebrate.

He was going to pass out. This was too much. This was all too much. He missed home, he missed work, he missed Scar. He was so, so, *so* tired.

“Don’t worry, though,” Terra said. His unnatural neutrality returned. “Once you and the Bamboozlers are dead, my team will be free of the Agency without a single bit of legal trouble. After that, it won’t be long until I’m able to get away from them entirely. No one will have a reason to chase me anymore. I’ll be free.”

The hero raised a hand, palm open. Slowly, he curled his fingers inward and clenched his fist. Without warning, the root around Grian’s left arm began to tighten significantly. He cried out at the

extreme pressure, unlike any he'd felt before.

"I'm sorry that freedom won't include you."

Crack.

Grian screamed as the unbearable pain enveloped him, mind, body, and soul. Tears streamed from his eyes, lightning soaring through his veins. His head drummed, vision dancing with spots. He writhed wildly, but a root around his torso kept him in place. No matter what he tried, he could not get away, could not escape the ripping agony.

Terra's plants retreated, and the vet's arm fell limply by his side, broken.

"Don't try to escape again," he said. "Two more days. Bear with us for two more days, and I'll make your death painless. Promise."

But Grian couldn't hear him anymore. The vet was fading in and out of consciousness, the world a distant thing. Vaguely, somewhere far away, he heard shuffling and the hinges of a door. He waited for it to be joined by the telltale click of the lock falling shut, but it never came.

Instead, he caught onto two familiar voices, Blackhole and Daybreak. They seemed frantic. He couldn't pick out any words.

Grian's head lulled back to gaze at the empty ceiling.

Two days until everyone he loved would die.

There were so many things he hadn't done, so many ways he hadn't appreciated them. He should have made an effort to listen to Mumbo's ramblings. He should have picked up more of Skizz's shifts. He should have let Lizzie talk about her relationship more often. He should have called Jimmy by his real name. He should have given his cats extra treats.

He should have called out of work. He should have stayed in bed with Scar.

His eyes fell shut.

Two days.

Scar held the phone up to his ear as it rang. His breath came in visible puffs in front of his face, but he didn't feel the cold. The warmth of his costume was more than enough to keep the heat in, and the breeze out. Winter clouds eliminated any hope of seeing the stars that the light pollution had not already stolen.

His feet dangled over the edge of the rooftop upon which he'd made himself comfortable. If he needed to stand in a rush, his crutch was propped up beside him, but he wasn't worried.

He gazed across the city skyline, eyes landing on one singular building.

Only two blocks from the park where the Gs had asked them to meet, surrounded by parking lots, and used barely enough to not be registered as abandoned. Transporting a hostage between there and the designated point would be easy, and the empty nature of the city surrounding it would mean no onlookers could raise suspicion.

The old community theater.

It was a sickeningly perfect place for a safe house. No one would suspect there to be an elaborate system of reinforced tunnels beneath the dressing rooms, and no one would question individuals entering and leaving it in dramatic costumes.

His thumb hovered over the remote in his lap.

Soon.

The ringing came to an abrupt stop as movement and muttering could be heard through the other end of the line. Scar waited for the answer, and was rewarded a moment later by a hesitant voice saying, *"Um, hello?"*

A grin broke out across his lips, cold glee rising in his chest.

"Hello, Morphling," Scar replied, sweet and soft. "So nice of you to answer my call."

There was a sharp intake of breath. *"Ringmaster?"*

“The one and only,” he confirmed. “I hope you don’t mind. We have quite a lot to chat about, and I really didn’t want to wait the full four days until we would see each other face to face.”

A series of loud whispers could be made out barely echoing through the receiver. Morphling was probably gathering his friends. Scar had no problem with an audience.

“Trace the call,” he overheard the hero say, probably to Blackhole, their known tech specialist. Maybe Morphling thought he was far enough away for his words not to reach, but they were clear as day to Scar. *“No, I don’t know… My phone number isn’t public. He shouldn’t be able to call it without an Agency-regulated phone.”*

“Ah, but this *is* an Agency-regulated phone, you see,” Scar piped up. The whispering stopped in an instant. The heroes were probably overcome with horror, which was a delicious notion. “It wasn’t hard to steal a device off a desk when the whole of the Agency is being distracted by your little sponsor. Good thinking, by the way. Keeping them off your case by throwing a bigger annoyance at them.”

The second Lizzie had heard about Mr. Keeper suddenly barging in and demanding meetings with everybody worthwhile in the Agency from Furioso, they’d planned their heist. Jimmy had no problem sneaking in during their meetings, not a soul around to notice if a door opened randomly or a desk drawer was rummaged through.

Tango had specially designed a digital lockpick for Agency phones, capable of running through the data prior to it being unlocked and pulling the code out simply by being plugged into the charging port. It was in the PR department where Jimmy finally found a device that had Morphling’s contact.

“Right,” Morphling replied, rigid and clearly shaken. Usually, he had

quite a bit more to add to their back and forths. *“Get to the point, Ringmaster. What d’ya want?”*

“Oh, I think you know the answer to that question,” Scar chuckled. “Give him back while I’m still being polite.”

“Hm,” Morphling hummed, unimpressed. *“Your vet?”*

“Yes,” Scar said, teeth clenching around the words. *“My* vet.”

A moment passed. Scar suspected they’d muted the call to discuss something without him hearing. His finger grew closer to the button, the remote a grounding, yet light, weight in his palm. Finally, they unmuted and he caught the end of Morphling’s sigh, *“Untraceable call. Irritating.”*

“It seems like you aren’t in the mood to talk. I’ll stop wasting your time, then,” Scar promised. “You have twelve hours to return Grian to me alive.”

“Really? Or else what?” Morphling sounded almost dismissive, a huff of laughter leaving him. *“Did you forget that we’re the ones with the hostage in this situation?”*

Scar pressed the button.

On the horizon, coming from the direction of an upper class suburban neighborhood, a large explosion tore through the sky. A miniscule mushroom cloud of dust, debris, and flames catapulted upward, burning red and hot. Sirens kicked up in several different spots, their shrill shrieks audible even from where Scar was sitting.

“Oh, dear,” Scar said, delight spilling across his tongue. It tasted like iron and sulfur. “My hand slipped. It would be such a shame if anyone were home when that bomb went off.”

The other end was deathly quiet. They hadn’t missed the explosion. No one in the city, no matter where they were, would have been able to. Scar had made sure of that.

It wouldn’t be long before there were videos circulating, depicting such a lovely two-story home engulfed in flames and collapsing in on itself. The lawn would be scorched black, the back garden incinerated, the windows smashed in the SUV parked in the driveway, which did not belong to the house’s owner.

The news would deem it a gruesome sight. Scar thought of it as deserved oblivion.

The first noise to come through the phone again was the ringing of another call. It was Daybreak’s voice that he heard next, muttering, *“Pick up, pick up, pick up…”*

Despite her begging, her call did not go through. A shaky exhalation reached him, breathing new air into his lungs with the strength of its terror.

“I’m afraid your dogsitter can’t come to the phone right now, Pearl,” Scar said. “You’ll have to try again later.”

“No,” the hero whispered. Daybreak must have yanked the phone from Morphling’s hands, suddenly right against the microphone. *“What did you do? My friend… my dogs…”*

“You know what I did,” Scar replied. The humor was gone from his tone, replaced completely with a gravity that not even the heroes could ignore. “And you know why I did it. Twelve hours.”

“No, please,” Daybreak whispered. *“It can’t be true… It can’t be.”*

“Take her to her room. Actually, no, go tell Terra. Hurry,” Morphling hissed. The shuffling indicated he’d stolen the phone from her. *“You’ve made your point clear, Ringmaster. We’ll think about it and–”*

“Ah-ah, just one more thing before you go,” Scar interrupted. He picked white fur off his pant leg, and wondered if Jimmy had dropped off the kennel at the clinic yet. “Let me speak to him.”

Another beat of stunned silence. “You think we’re going to let you… speak to our hostage?”

Their hostage.

Scar’s brow twitched.

Their hostage – like they didn’t know his name, like Grian belonged to them in some way. His partner was not someone to be summed up so casually, with such degrading words as *their hostage.*

It was almost admirable, the level of self-assuredness this one hero had. He spoke as though he considered himself to be untouchable, on Scar’s level. The concept alone made the villain’s hands twitch with rage, red light flaring up around his finger tips, yearning to be put to

use.

He wondered how easy it would be to cut out Morphling's tongue, so he'd never be able to speak of Grian like that again.

"I *know* you are," Scar corrected them. "Unless you'd like to see more carnage tonight, you are going to let me speak to Grian."

Morphling had the nerve to mumble something under his breath, but after a minute, he relented. *"Fine,"* the hero said. *"Let me take the phone to him."*

The other line went quiet. He'd been muted again.

Scar tapped a hand against his side, and chewed on his lips. Anticipation ran like sparks up his spine, pausing to whirl around in his gut before continuing on their path. His whole being ached, focused on the phone.

Grian.

He was going to *speak* to *Grian.*

They'd been apart for too long. Not a call, not a message, not a single word exchanged for two weeks. There was a void in Scar's life where Grian should've been, hollowed and rotten. Endless nights spent curled up on the couch, the living room far too cold and far too quiet. Endless nights spent alone in bed, trying to soak in the last remaining scents of him. Endless nights spent hunched over a drawing board, desperate to bring him home.

And finally, his planning was paying off. He was going to speak to Grian. His Grian. His doctor. The love of his life. The person he'd burn the world to save.

Scar was so close, so near, almost there. If he reached out, he could trick himself into feeling a hand meeting his, fingers intertwining with his own, his heart finally filling with the love it'd lost two weeks before. He could hardly breathe from the rapid force of his pulse.

When the microphone crackled to indicate they'd unmuted again, Scar could've fallen over. Too hastily, he found himself blurting, "Hello?"

For a moment, there was nothing. No shuffling, no release of air, no response. For a moment, Scar found his finger hovering over the button, rage searing its mark into his ribs at the prospect of his beloved vet being too injured to answer.

After a minute though, he heard someone's breath hitch.

"Ringmaster? Is that you?"

Scar couldn't repress the immediate well of tears that gathered in his eyes. Grian's voice was hoarse and quiet, but it was there. It was *him.* A wet laugh sprang from Scar's chest. "Hi, Doctor."

"It is *you,"* Grian whispered, astonishment evident in his tone. *"What's going on? Why are you on the phone? How did you–"*

Grian was cut off abruptly by a rough coughing fit. His hacking and

wheezing went on for several seconds, tapering off into a series of gasped breaths and groans. As quickly as it had arrived, Scar's joy vanished. He knew those sounds, had heard them in himself and his teammates dozens of times.

A broken rib.

Someone had given Grian a *broken rib.*

Scar dug his nails into the fabric of his pants, vision overwhelmed by red. Despite the dropping temperature, heat curled under his skin, curdled in his gut, and gathered in his throat.

"Grian," Scar started, seething with unadulterated fury. "Did they hurt you?"

He already knew the answer, already knew his response, already knew how he would repay those *heroes* tenfold. They thought themselves above him. They thought themselves two steps ahead. They thought themselves worthy of competing against him. They thought they could win.

"Yes," Grian replied, voice cracking, nearly inaudible. *"They did."*

Scar pressed the button twice more in rapid succession.

Two points along the horizon burst into flame, thick smoke and ash throwing itself into the air. The rumbling of the nearest explosion echoed rippled as far as the theater, shaking the leaves of the trees planted around it. A commotion started on the other end of the call.

“Ringmaster,” Morphling growled. *“What did you just do?”*

Scar did not answer him, didn’t think he’d earned it. He could see the scenes though. Two cars, one parked outside the Agency, and the other right beside the doors to Secret Keeper Corp. They’d be barely recognizable by then, the smell of burning metal pungent in the air, with an untold amount of damage done to any unlucky enough to be too near when it happened.

“Twelve hours,” Scar declared. “Or I’ll come get him myself.”

The call went dead.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NOT-REALLY TUESDAY!! THANKS FOR 315K HITS <33

The chapter's not 40k words this time, but I think 25.3k isn't too shabby either, given I wrote it on top of school work and my job. My poor schedule is torn to shreds, but it's out and that's all I care about! Editing this so late at night means there's definitely going to be some errors I catch tomorrow, we're just gonna ignore that for now.

More importantly, Midnight Strangers is almost complete! Who's pumped for the final chapter coming out soon? I know I am!!

As always, this fic is only possible thanks to my tireless beta readers, Cody and Smiif!

For more updates on my writing process during this last little bit before the fic ends, check me out on twitter or tumblr! There's also a discord server, which you can join here!

See you hopefully in two to three weeks with the finale of Midnight Strangers. I'm going to do my best to make sure it's everything it deserves to be. Until then <3

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: The rating of this fic has gone up to Mature due to an increase in themes of death and violence. Please be aware of that moving forward.
>
> Thank you for your patience while waiting for this chapter, guys. I have had every possible major life event lobbed at my head full force, especially as of last week, when I had originally intended for this chapter to be posted, and that slowed me down so much.
>
> For our finale, as I believe this fic deserves, I have carefully prepared a large chapter of 66.6k words. Unfortunately, ao3 has a character limit per-chapter. Not sure if you knew about that, but I found out the hard way. That being said, this chapter has been cut up in a way that hopefully will not disturb your reading experience, but keep in mind that Chapters 14 and 15 were originally just one.
>
> Please Enjoy.

There were lights and voices all around him, buzzing like flies against his skull. His arm was a brighter, louder, bolder force than every other feature of the room. Every grasping hope for consciousness slipped away, fading in and out with the waves of oncoming agony. It would've been easier if he could pass out, if he could stop being aware of it, if he could just go numb already.

Grian was pretty sure he was crying. He could feel the characteristic sting of salt in his eyes, which stayed half open in a state of shock. Were his skin not seared beyond the point of sensation by pain, he was sure he would've noticed the tears traveling down his cheeks, collecting into a pool on the concrete floor beneath him.

A hand had settled on his shoulder, unmoving but tight. It belonged to the person speaking, shouting, growling at a source that Grian didn't hear responding. When the voices grew in volume, he felt it travel to the back of his neck almost subconsciously, before jolting. All he

noted about the touch was the careful way it avoided his broken arm, as if it were scared of the reaction that would cause.

He wished it would move. He wished he'd pass out. He wished he were anywhere but here.

"…rian… Grian… *Grian—"*

A voice pried through the restraints of his skull, repeating his name in the same ringing frequency as the pounding behind his temples. Despite hearing it, he did not stir. His name held little power against the throbbing and aching that cradled him at his lowest.

"You have to speak," said the voice again, closer to his ear. Morphling, he recognized, sounded desperate. Something was rushed about the way he spoke, like the situation was urgent. Interesting, but not enough to truly warrant Grian expending energy he didn't have. "Irritating."

"Just hold the phone up to his mouth," came another person's voice, Blackhole. "If Grian doesn't speak after hearing him, we'll just have to come up with an excuse."

Him?

Grian winced at the way his spiking confusion caused his headache to slam into him again with all its might. It pulled him further under, but as always, he resurfaced not a second later, propelled forward by the anguish in his arm. He couldn't care about the mention of a phone, or a mysterious *him* while his body felt like it was decomposing.

Until, finally, he heard it.

That *voice.*

Not Morphling, nor Blackhole. It wasn't even Terra, who had been a faint but looming presence in the room from the moment Grian's arm had been broken and onward.

"Hello?"

Grian's eyes opened in an instant, a jolt of the sweetest relief numbing his mind with a singular word.

There was a phone in front of him. A call had been ongoing for a couple of minutes, though the number was not under any contact name. Not that Grian needed anything like that to reach a startling conclusion. The screen's glow was far too harsh for him to focus on for long, but he persevered.

He *knew* that voice. It wasn't just a simple vague recognition. Rather, this was an intonation he'd learned after listening to it time and time again. He *knew* that voice. Really, truly *knew* it.

He'd heard it days ago, when a vigilante had taken the form of the one he loved most, using a modulator to change his pitch, but it hadn't been right. Not upon closer inspection. This one was clear, present, *his.*

Scar had said it.

It was Scar on the other end of the line.

His voice was distorted by the modulator in his mask, with a prick of static coming through the microphone from where wind whispered around the edges. Grian could almost see him from that brief second of audio — in full costume, framed by a darkened sky, phone up to his mask so that he'd be heard properly, a glint to his green eyes.

Grian wanted to sob, wanted to genuinely see him, wanted to speak and be heard by someone who cared. He opened his mouth, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Morphling's lips part in surprise.

Right, he thought, wincing through another quieter wave of pain. *Still being watched.*

He couldn't call Scar's name, no matter how much he wished to. He couldn't reveal everything he'd discovered to him — the Gs' independence from the Agency, their lethal intentions, the true depths of their plot, or their horrendous treatment of him. Undoubtedly, there would be consequences for acting out in any way.

His bones ached, his head throbbed, but he needed to speak to Scar carefully, needed to put his wants aside just to stay aware a little bit longer.

"Ringmaster," he rasped, barely there, barely conscious, barely audible. A small breath of air through the microphone indicated Scar heard it anyway.

His throat squeezed from the words, and he swallowed back against a pained noise. He wasn't quite done, needed to say more, needed to ask more. The Gs had tricked him before, had put Werewolf up to the task before, so how could he trust a simple voice that he'd heard only

briefly? He needed to say something that only Scar would be able to answer, something that would assure that Scar was the only one on the other end of the line.

However, through the strain, he could only manage to quietly ask, “Is that you?”

The response was instantaneous. Familiar, bubbling, devastated laughter came through the receiver. Scar’s voice cracked as he replied, *“Hi, Doctor.”*

Grian’s chest squeezed.

They couldn’t fake that nickname. They couldn’t fake that *laugh.*

“It *is* you,” Grian realized aloud, mouth opening with astonishment. He could feel the Gs staring at him, but he could not care less. The emotions that had been building within him flared into a massive wave of energy, love, anguish, and despite his pain, he blurted, “What’s going on? Why are you on the phone? How did you–”

Unfortunately, his emotions were not enough to completely stave off the effects of his injured body. The intake of air swelled against his broken rib, and he choked on his words. A cough punched out of him, followed by another, until he had bent at the waist to wheeze for air. His restraints — which blessedly only remained around his uninjured arm and legs — tightened as a response, but he could hardly feel it.

The change in posture did little to quell the irritation of his lungs, though. When stars stopped bursting behind his eyelids, he forced himself to straighten and focused on sucking in small bursts of air to gain control. It was a rough, arduous process. His body shook from the waves of pain, and the trembling worked in tandem with his newly-

broken arm to create a looping, continuous sensation.

He could feel weak groans escape him, but his mouth was numb for the time being. Grian wasn't in the right mind to finish his questions, nor was he really capable of listening for detailed answers either.

Scar must've been able to tell. He was always far too attuned to everything about Grian. Instead of giving a long-winded answer, or asking something that would require a thorough response, he kept it simple.

"Grian," Scar started, a low threat churning beneath the surface of his words. His words sounded as though they'd been forced through gritted teeth. *"Did they hurt you?"*

Grian knew that tone in Scar's voice, knew this question already had an answer, knew he had worked out what was happening, knew there would be no lying to him.

His gaze drifted to the Gs. Morphling's eyes went wide behind his mask. Necromancer straightened where she stood over his shoulder. Terra leaned against the far wall next to Daybreak, whose lips trembled and whose fingers would not stop fidgeting with her cloak. Blackhole was to Grian's left, hands curled into fists by his side. Had the vet been well enough to laugh, he would have at that moment.

They didn't want him to speak. The fact that he was having a back and forth with Scar at all was making them extremely nervous, and this inquiry had only elevated that anxiety. Which meant, no matter what he said now, there would be consequences.

He felt the throb in his arm, the burn in his throat, the squeeze in his chest, the chafing along his skin, the hunger in his gut.

The Gs had already done so much. He could handle a few more consequences.

"Yes," Grian croaked. "They did."

Click. Click.

The noises were faint enough to barely be caught. Their effects were not as subtle.

The building rumbled, two echoing *booms* coming in rapid succession from somewhere beyond them. They reverberated through the air, shivering in the ground, the walls, the roof, and the people bearing witness.

An explosion. More than one.

The phone was yanked back to Morphling, and Grian let his head lull forward, chin resting against his chest. He closed his eyes, all of his energy spent.

"Ringmaster," the hero growled. "What did you just do?"

"Twelve hours," Scar gravely declared. *"Or I'll come get him myself."*

A beeping sounded around the room as the call went dead. As soon as that too fell away, a silence unlike any other filtered in to fill its

absence. Nothing dared to break it.

A beat passed. Two. Three.

Shakily, Necromancer breathed, “What now?”

Morphling shifted beside Grian, drawing in air like he was about to speak, but nothing came forth.

“Now,” came a deep, almost-amused tone from across the room. Inadvertently, Grian tensed as Terra took over the conversation. “Our plans have to change. You heard him. Twelve hours.”

Twelve hours.

Grian knew — on the most baseline level, given he was still processing his surroundings as if everything were buried under layers of sand — what that meant. It was a time limit for the Gs, counting down until an inevitable force came in and ruined their plans. Perhaps they had more context as to what exactly that would be.

Aside from hearing two explosions in the distance, and exchanging painfully few words with his partner, he was still in the dark. However, their apprehension made it clear that Scar had scared them. Thoroughly. Enough for this time limit to cause a wave of dread to sweep through the room.

Some part of that brought Grian an almost giddy sort of joy. Their positions had been flipped — the kidnappers becoming the ones dangling uselessly by the puppeteer’s strings. They’d been so proud of their plan, so certain it would go off without a hitch, but the

Bamboozlers were never a predictable force. Not really.

"What did he hit?" Blackhole questioned, grim and quiet. Then, a bit louder, he added, "Should we worry about *our* homes too?"

Grian's brows furrowed, mind catching on the mention of the heroes' homes.

"No," Morphling replied. "No, almost certainly not. Only Daybreak was a target today."

There was a surety to his tone that caused a ripple of murmurs to travel around the room. Necromancer was the one to finally ask, "How can you be certain? Shouldn't we go check just in case?"

"No, that's what he *wants,"* Morphling snapped, another large breath leaving him. "He said twelve hours, but if even one of us abandons our post to check it out, they'll attack."

"Morph's right," Terra added. "They'll be watchin' us like hawks from here on out."

Grian swallowed back a rising hope. He knew better than to let himself feel these things prematurely, but he was only human. How could he contain his emotions under these circumstances?

Scar was watching them. Scar knew where he was. Scar was coming for him. And, most importantly, the Gs didn't *want* him to. This wasn't part of their plan.

“Hm,” Blackhole hummed, but he didn’t sound satisfied. “That still doesn’t answer the question, though. How did he get DB’s name and address?”

Daybreak made a noise in the back of her throat — one Grian could only describe as raw and *scared.* Something had truly shaken her, enough for the very mention of it to draw forth a reaction.

What exactly had Scar done? What did it have to do with a hero’s name and address?

“I should’ve realized it would be a problem earlier, but I didn’t,” Morphling admitted, wholly disappointed. “Daybreak, your dogsitter… She wasn’t with the Agency, was she?”

Daybreak didn’t offer a response. The silence spoke for her.

“No,” Necromancer whispered. Then, louder, they hissed, “You *didn’t!”*

“I couldn’t go completely no-contact,” Daybreak bit back. “Tilly was due any day! I couldn’t leave my friend without any help — it was just a text or two, nothing huge!”

“That doesn’t matter,” Blackhole scoffed. “Pearl, I could track you just for *having* an unapproved phone. You *know* better!”

Pearl?

Grian frowned.

Was Daybreak's name *Pearl?* Like his *cat?*

God, what perfect irony that would be — one of his tormentors sharing a name with one of his most beloved companions. Grian wondered how long the universe had waited to reveal that cruel joke to him. The powers that be must've been nudging each other every day, snickering and muttering, *"Wait until he finds out! He's not going to like this!"*

Pearl and Maui — would he ever see them again? If Scar was lurking nearby, did that mean it was alright to hope? Did that mean there was a chance to get out? Did that mean his world wasn't too far out of his reach anymore?

His shoulders tightened.

"Watch what you say," Necromancer scolded, harsh and low. They had noticed. "The vet is not asleep."

"It doesn't matter," Daybreak shouted, pitch higher and more desperate than any of the others. A choked sob came from her direction, joined by a chorus of rough gasps. Her next words were muffled as she'd obviously slipped a hand over her mouth. "What's done is done. That *monster* knows me, so it's over. We're all *done for…"*

She trailed off at the end, an innately human noise cutting through her voice.

Daybreak was crying. Actually, genuinely crying.

The hero, who had regarded him with a murderous disdain since they'd met, was *crying*.

Grian's eyes opened then, blinking through the sting of salt. He had to look. He had to witness this.

Through the haze in his vision, he saw Daybreak's mighty visage replaced with a crumbling picture.

She was hunched over, curled in on herself. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks, smeared the winged makeup beside her eyes, and disappeared beneath the mask that covered the lower half of her face. The glistening hint of even more streaks along her skin implied these were not the first she'd shed in a short span of time. Her hair was a mess, frayed and tangled, like she'd been dragging her fingers through it over and over.

She looked broken. Lost. Afraid.

Grian wished it brought him satisfaction. It did not.

"My friend… my dogs… Gone… They're gone," Daybreak murmured repeatedly. "They're gone. I have *nothing.*"

It was impossible not to look upon this sight with pity. He didn't know what exactly had happened, but through those utterances, he could make an educated guess.

Scar had…

Well, it was hard to say.

It *sounded* like Scar had tracked down Daybreak's civilian home and laid waste to every living creature within its walls.

But that was hard for him to believe.

Maybe Grian was just being naive, thinking with his heart instead of his head. Still, none of that lined up with the man he knew. Ringmaster, who had ceased his threats towards Grian's life upon discovering he had cats. His boyfriend, who had fallen for Grian because of the way he valued life. Scar, who hadn't killed a soul since meeting Grian, simply because he knew it would upset the vet.

Suddenly, he was supposed to believe that man had slaughtered not only an innocent civilian, but several *animals* as well?

Not possible. Not for a single second. Not even the starved, half-dead spark that made up Grian's remaining critical thinking skills could miss the oddness of the whole situation.

Something was being omitted. Something that Daybreak, for all she was mourning, had not yet caught.

She believed it. She believed Scar had killed someone she loved. She believed her dog, those puppies, and her friend were all dead because of her slip-up.

Grian's heart squeezed against his will, habitual empathy rising alongside a more conscious disgust — though the latter emotion was directed inwardly. Pity should've been reserved for people who deserved it. Good people. Worthwhile people.

This was his own fault, he supposed. Grian had spent too long helping villains, shoving aside his morals to provide care, and now, he'd lost the ability to differentiate between the proper moments to offer help, and when it was best to keep to himself. It'd happened briefly when Necromancer had bled in front of him. Now, it was happening again.

He looked at her, and he felt *bad.*

Her teammates, evidently, did not share the sentiment.

None of the Gs tried to approach her. They stayed rooted to the floor, almost as if they too were restrained. Their pity, supposing they had any, was hidden behind their masks. A tense uncertainty wafted off their forms, like they were worried her despair might be contagious, like her misfortune might spread to them, like their egos were of higher importance than comforting their friend.

Then, Daybreak met Grian's eyes. Her pupils dilated, sadness switching to rage faster than he could process the change.

"You," she growled. "This is *your* fault."

Grian's breath caught.

Oh no.

“Daybreak,” Blackhole said, a warning in his tone. “Don’t.”

But it didn’t reach her.

Daybreak lunged.

Grian saw the glinting of her blades, the bloodlust overflowing from her gaze, the animalistic compulsion in her movements.

She pulled her arm back and slashed at the same time as he jerked to the side. The scythe grazed his cheek, spilling shallow blood across the metal. Daybreak growled, and raised her other arm. She would not miss a second time.

Grian squeezed his eyes shut.

He was going to die. She was going to kill him. Scar wasn’t going to get to him in time.

There was a massive rush of sound, like the entire building was crashing down around them. Wind burst through alongside it, as if a train was speeding past, bringing a wave of dust and debris into the air.

Grian’s eyes jerked open again, flitting up to the ceiling, expecting to witness a cave-in of epic proportions. His assumptions were horrifically incorrect.

The destruction had come from *below.*

Grian heard a chorus of gasps echo through the room, along with a scream, as roots broke through the concrete floor and shot towards the raging hero.

With a speed that was impossible to dodge, Daybreak was grabbed around the arms, legs, and torso. She thrashed and fought to no avail. Her blades were ripped off the armor plating that connected them to her body, rendering her helpless against her new restraints. “No! Damn it, let me *go!”*

The rumbling stopped. The room fell silent, aside from Daybreak’s struggling and groaning. Morphling, Necromancer, and Blackhole had gone deathly still, watching the scene with fear plainly written over their expressions.

The dust cleared around a looming figure. Terra’s golden eye shone brighter than ever before, his arm outstretched in his teammate’s direction.

“Pearl,” Terra said, tone steady and indifferent. “You’re not going to ruin this for us.”

A shiver traveled up Grian’s spine.

“It doesn’t matter,” Daybreak retorted, humorless laughter ripping from her throat. “Nothing matters. Our plan relied on time, which we don’t have anymore. We can’t *win!”*

Terra curled his hand into a fist, and the roots began to squeeze,

winding themselves tighter around her. Daybreak's anger transformed into cries of pain.

"Terra," Morphling whispered, seeming to come out of his trance at the noise. His volume rose to a shout. "Terra! Stop!"

Terra's gaze drifted to the other hero.

He watched Morphling silently for a moment.

Then, he dropped his hand.

The roots fell away all at once, dropping Daybreak against the concrete ground. She fell hard, the impact punching the air out of her. The plants slithered back into the split earth. Terra stood over her writhing form, expressionless.

"Terra," Necromancer started, slowly and quietly, like they were talking someone off a ledge. "That wasn't necessary. Daybreak is just… grieving."

Terra's lips twitched up into a half-smile. "Grieving? By trying to *kill* the only person keeping us alive?"

Necromancer's mouth shut. Beneath their veil, they had begun to frown.

"You know as well as I do that the vet being here is the only thing keeping them from bringing this building down on top of us." Terra

crossed his arms over his chest, chin tilting up. “They value *his* life, not ours.”

He stepped forward, over Daybreak’s body, leaving her to curl into a ball behind him. She did not try to get up. Her shoulders shook, small sniffles racking her form. Never before had Grian seen her look so insignificant.

“You’re right,” Morphling said, not quite backing down, but his tone wasn’t as indifferent anymore. It sounded vaguely like he was masking panic as he added, “Still, we’ll have to adjust our plan to fit this new time cap, and we don’t need our own teammates hurt before we can even start.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Grian watched Terra’s singular golden eye drag up and down Morphling’s form. “Of course. I know that very well.”

To the vet’s surprise, the latter seemed to shrink beneath the weight of it. Morphling was pale, mouth a thin line and hands clenching and unclenching by his side.

“Let’s not waste anymore time, then,” Terra replied. His gaze finally flicked down to Grian. There was something akin to amusement in the way his lips twisted into a smile. Grian gritted his teeth, fear, anguish, disgust rising. His arm throbbed, his mind spun, black spots pricking at the edges of his vision. “Try to get some rest, Grian. You’re not going to be able to for much longer.”

The root around his uninjured arm tightened slightly.

Terra turned on his heel and left.

Grian felt no relief.

He stayed upright for only as long as it took for the rest of the Gs to shuffle out as well, none of them having the guts to speak a word. Blackhole dipped to carefully pick up Daybreak, muttering something privately to her, and then they were gone.

The door slammed shut. Grian jolted as he was plunged into darkness, body twinging. The movement sent shockwaves of pain through his entire body. After a long while of remaining still, the agony dulled to a consistent throbbing ache — not comfortable, but not unbearable — and he slumped. That sensation enveloped him, a more numb unconsciousness taking its place.

Finally, in that floating limbo, where only the most minimal amount of anguish could reach him, he found some reprieve. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. Just until he woke up.

Scar was there, in that space behind his eyes, waiting for him. He was smiling, soft, blurry around the edges. Grian knew it was him, though. He was warm, loving, and comfortable. When his arms wrapped around the vet, the pain was soothed, reality subsided, and he was able to simply breathe.

If Grian really focused, he could almost feel the brush of hands along his skin, the safety of the other's presence, the soft whisper of his name on the wind.

"Grian… Grian, come on," said a voice that did not belong to Scar. "It's time to wake up."

Scar pulled away from him, smile fading. Grian couldn't understand why. Why would Scar pull back? Why would he leave? Why wouldn't he remain by Grian's side for as long as possible?

The vet wanted to stay there — until everything bad disappeared, until the real world couldn't reach him anymore, until his dreams were all that mattered.

He was not allowed such a luxury.

His dream image of Scar was overtaken by a thick fog, and Grian came back to himself. He felt the world around him, felt light hitting his eyelids, felt the weight of his own body flood in.

He waited for the pain to follow.

Waited, waited, *waited.*

But it did not come.

His whole being felt… *odd* — that was the best way to describe it. There was a peculiar, faraway floating going on. The tips of his fingers buzzed, and his mind contained a strange cloudiness, as if he were still dreaming. Where there should've been immense agony as his senses caught up with his past injuries, there was only a subtle, background thrum.

Confused, Grian forced his eyes to open. As expected, the lights in the room were switched on, and they blinded him. His eyes stung,

blinking rapidly to push through it. Eventually, the brightness cleared enough to allow him to make out the shapes of his surroundings.

Immediately, he noticed a change.

Though blurry, he could tell that the space around him was different. There were more things occupying it, shining like metal and on some sort of wheels. Clearing his eyes a bit more revealed something almost familiar in nature. Slowly, Grian raised his head, his neck stiff but willing.

His heart jumped into his throat. He blinked several more times, not certain that he wasn't hallucinating, or still dreaming.

There was an IV drip positioned just to his right, already hooked up to his arm, and no roots held his body in place.

"There you are!"

Grian startled at the loud words echoing through the room. It was with that jerking motion that he felt the first spike of pain return to him, though it didn't remain for long. The sensation ricocheted through him, and then dissipated almost instantly.

He didn't have a chance to analyze that strange effect, however, because his attention had moved to focus completely on the figure of Blackhole standing a few feet away.

The hero was holding a bowl in one hand, and a cup in the other. His posture was relaxed, unhurried, and his words had been cheery. There was no sign of the quiet, scared member of the Gs that Grian had seen

before falling asleep. Whatever had happened in the time since he'd last seen the man had greatly affected his demeanor.

"I thought you'd never wake up," Blackhole announced with a robotic chuckle. His visor gave nothing of his expression away, but as he drew nearer, Grian could see a tension in the guy's shoulders that he'd missed before.

The vet's tongue felt numb, and his head spun a bit, but he was well enough to cough out a quiet, "How… How long was I asleep?"

"Three hours," Blackhole said, unnervingly chipper, like he was overcompensating. On a twelve hour timer, Grian could guess why his long loss of consciousness might have caused some stress. "How are you feeling?"

A moment of silence passed while the question was processed. Blackhole tilted his head.

Grian opened his mouth, unsure of the proper response. It should have been simple, but after giving it a second of thought, it occurred to him that he wasn't actually *feeling* much of anything.

The lethargy of sleep clung most reliably to him, but little else stuck. His limbs, though not pained, felt separate from him. Emotions slipped from him as quickly as they arrived — anger, fear, and confusion pooling into a neutral uncertainty that he could not fully define. Still, it was the clearest his mind had been in too long.

"I dunno," Grian whispered. His voice was hoarse, but his throat wasn't as scratchy and upsetting anymore. "Did you… give me painkillers?"

It was the only explanation he could find. Unlike the orange dust of Terra's own invention, the refreshing relief of nothingness continued to flow through his veins without visible consequence. Drowsiness, numbness, a floaty feeling — Grian had experienced this in the past only on visits to the hospital.

Blackhole huffed, "You're intuitive."

Grian grimaced.

So, he *had* been drugged. The question now was with what? It was strong, extremely effective. Morphine, maybe? If that was it, why would the heroes have morphine on hand? Why would they give it to him? What dosage had they used?

It made him immensely uncomfortable to think about a group of untrained heroes attempting to poke at his veins. Administering drugs could be a dangerous process, giving too much or too little both had the potential for long-term effects, supposing they'd even injected it correctly in the first place.

Though, that was perhaps an unfounded fear. His IV was correctly attached, steadily drip, drip, dripping a clear liquid into his veins. Glancing at it closer, the bag did not indicate what was within.

Blackhole followed his gaze, drawing in a breath, "Oh, no, that's just the regular fluid. I pushed a dose about an hour or two ago to keep you relaxed."

"Right," Grian rasped, brows furrowing slightly. He could not hold back his confusion. "Why did you–?"

Blackhole stepped forward, setting his bowl and cup down on a rolling cart to Grian's left, which he had not noticed before. It wasn't hidden or even tucked into his peripherals, he'd simply glanced over it without giving it a second thought. The painkillers hadn't been totally without consequence, then — the vet's observational skills were embarrassing in his current state.

"Don't worry too much," Blackhole hummed. Grian raised a brow, skin buzzing with the same worry he was being told not to have, but the hero paid this expression no mind. He gestured down at something lower on the vet's body. "I thought it best you didn't feel what I was doing."

Grian glanced down at himself for the first time since waking.

His eyes widened as he realized his broken arm was straightened and bandaged in a style he recognized.

A splint.

His arm had been put in a *splint.*

Grian heard himself mutter under his breath, too astonished to bite back his inner thoughts, "What in the world—?"

A splint on one arm, an IV in the other, pain medication flowing through his veins, and a hero standing before him, responsible for all of it.

Grian was tempted to pinch himself, just to see if it was real, but he figured the drugs might nullify that test.

"Why?" The vet sounded quiet even to his own ears, but he couldn't bring himself to speak any louder. Perhaps it was just the effects of the fogginess caused by the painkillers, but he could not make sense of his situation in the slightest. From every single angle, things did not add up. "I don't—? *How?"*

Blackhole regarded him silently for several seconds.

Then, he sighed, beginning to push the metal cart towards Grian. Its wheels squealed as they rolled, and as it neared, it had to be steered carefully around the crack in the floor that Terra had caused. The vet was able to smell the contents of the bowl once it was close enough. The scent was one he recognized, given he'd spent weeks making it for a man whose stomach could digest little else.

Chicken noodle soup.

Finally, after eating only cereal, stale bread, and a poisoned sandwich, the hero had actually brought food that was appropriate for his current condition. It would be nutritious, whilst also being easy to digest. If he were allowed to take this slowly, then he might actually finish a meal without getting nauseous for the first time in far too long.

Grian's stomach grumbled. His mouth watered. He tried not to show his interest on his face, tried to be skeptical, but his situation was already far too strange for something as normal as a quick meal to put him off. His first questions and worries remained focused on the IV and the pain meds. However, both of those issues had a lot less potential to do him wrong if he had a solid basis of food in his stomach.

The cart paused just in front of him, and Blackhole picked up the bowl. The spoon was already resting within, waiting to be used. Grian thought he might be expected to feed himself, despite even his least injured arm being numbed beyond usefulness, but Blackhole was quick to take on that responsibility as well.

A small spoonful of soup was gathered and held tentatively in front of Grian's face. It was from that close distance that the hero's lack of giant metal gloves was made most apparent. Blackhole had never been hiding the fact that he was disarmed, but in light of other confusions, prying eyes had jumped over such a small detail, exactly as they had with the presence of the cart.

Mortifying as it was, the vet couldn't pretend that he wasn't interested in the soup. He let Blackhole feed it to him, and the warmth of the broth coated his tongue perfectly. The burning twinge of Terra's drugs did not kick in, like he distantly feared it might, so he allowed himself another bite.

Thankfully, unlike his past experiences of being fed by the heroes, he wasn't made to move too quickly. Blackhole only offered another spoonful when it seemed Grian was ready. The soup itself wasn't too much or too little — simply filling, in the way food was meant to be for someone with a digestive system currently as off-kilter as his own.

Obviously, the process of relying on an enemy for something as necessary as eating was harder to stomach than the meal itself. To keep from spiralling, Grian tried to focus on smaller facets of his situation. Blackhole held the spoon gently, and from the vet's angle, he could make out a great amount of discoloration, healed-over injuries, and calluses visible all along the man's skin. It reminded Grian of Scar's hands, rough from years in the industry.

Unlike his partner, however, the hero seemed to have a concentration

of particularly disconcerting swelling around his knuckles. It looked like the after-effects of punching something over and over again, but the skin wasn't broken enough to indicate anything like that had been done recently. And also, from what Grian had gathered from bits of conversations, it seemed like the Gs as a group were staying out of the scene until their plan was complete.

A question was raised then about the longevity of this specific injury. It was possible that this was not, in fact, swelling, but a visible manifestation of a much larger issue, perhaps regarding the tendons or tissue of his hands.

For a hero whose main weapons were his fists, the idea of swollen, or even disfigured knuckles being utilized in battle for an untold amount of time was enough to make Grian shiver. His eyes trailed up to Blackhole's visor, which was tipped down as he gathered another spoonful of broth.

How much shock absorption did his gloves actually have?

"I'm properly trained," Blackhole said, startling Grian out of his contemplative trance. "If you were wondering."

"Oh, um," Grian stammered. "I wasn't—"

"I saw you staring just now," Blackhole interrupted, not giving him a chance to make excuses. "It's fine. I know a professional like yourself would probably be nervous about accepting medical help from someone like me, but I promise I know what I'm doing."

While it hadn't actually been the reason behind Grian's staring, he wouldn't deny that this new direction of thought was an interesting one. A hero with medical training definitely piqued his curiosity. He

did his best to remain neutral as he inquired further, “Really? You’re trained?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Blackhole hummed, though it was said through the cadence of a joke. He briefly set aside the soup to allow Grian to take a drink of water. It was a sweet relief, even if he only took small sips for the time being. “Believe it or not, I wasn’t always a member of the city’s biggest hero group… y’know, second to Furioso and Slayer, of course.”

While the displeasure in his voice as he mentioned two of his coworkers by name was notable, Grian latched onto the concept of there being a *before* for someone from the Agency. And wasn’t that an intriguing piece of information — the knowledge of what one of his captors did prior to this present, monstrous lifestyle.

Grian swallowed his last sip of water, and when Blackhole pulled away to pick up the soup again, he asked, “Were you a doctor once?”

“Hm? Oh, gosh, no,” Blackhole chuckled, shaking his head. “I was barely twenty when my power manifested and the Agency brought me in. I was just… well, a bit of a loser, to put it simply. They stuck me in the medical ward to train, since the idea of a teleporting doctor was really appealing to them. I got pretty good at my job.”

He seemed to pause, spoon hesitating in the bowl.

“I got, uh, *too* good at my job,” Blackhole said after a minute. He was quieter, more thoughtful. “Turns out, the more you practice with your power, the stronger it gets. Then, suddenly, a hero that could teleport directly to emergencies was more irresistible than a doctor.”

Maybe Grian was imagining it, but he thought the other sounded

slightly disappointed by this change. It was gone before he could press.

"Of course, I got lucky," he said, suddenly brighter. "They assigned me to join the Gs, back when it was just Morph, DB, and Nec. Those three were best friends, so it was easy to find a place with them, like joining a new family."

Grian grimaced. Joining a pre-established friend group was *not* what came to mind when he thought of something as easy. No amount of layered-on chipperness could hide it from him. Maybe the group was fine now, but it likely hadn't always been that way.

The vet felt pity start to form, felt himself begin to debate how he would feel in Blackhole's place — pulled out of his studies and thrust into a job just based on how the Agency thought he might best serve them. He wondered what kind of life that designed, what kind of person that created, what kind of opportunities that presented.

Grian stopped halfway through that thought.

The last time he'd fallen for a hero's sob story, his arm had been broken. It hadn't mattered that Terra was telling the truth — that his situation really was beyond awful, that the system had forced him into a corner and exploited him for years — because he was using that negativity to harm others.

For the same reasons, it didn't matter that Blackhole had been stolen away from his regular life simply for the crime of developing useful powers. It didn't matter that he was feeding Grian good food, treating him politely, giving him much-needed medical attention, because all of that was being done with an ulterior motive. There was never a world in which these heroes did something kind without reason. This was another step in his good cop act, and the vet wouldn't buy it.

Grian hardened his heart. “Why are you doing this?”

The hero’s shoulders tensed for a split second, but he recovered in the same instant. Blackhole offered him another spoonful of soup. Grian didn’t accept it. He’d eaten enough by then to repress the urge to lurch towards the slightest offering. It was progress, however small, towards regaining his own strength.

His stubbornness earned him a sigh. “I’m just being nice. Isn’t that enough?”

“No,” the vet replied.

“Fair.” Blackhole shrugged, switching out the soup for water, and that was not something that could be refused. For as much as he would’ve preferred to refrain to gain more answers, Grian relented and took a few small sips. “You’re right. This was Terra’s suggestion.”

Grian choked around the rim of the cup. It was pulled away from him, and a firm hand was patting his back in a matter of seconds.

“Oh, geez, dude,” Blackhole muttered. “Breathe, breathe.”

Grian struggled to regain his lost air. He saw flashes of a singular glowing eye, felt the phantom pain of an unknown drug, ached through the confines of the painkillers in places where roots had once squeezed.

This was all part of Terra’s plan, then.

Everything made a lot more sense.

It wasn't like Morphling, in all his arrogant glory, to suddenly decide to treat Grian nicely. Terra, though, knew their enemies better than any of his teammates. If he'd made the call to allow the vet medical treatment, it was for a reason.

Unfortunately, the specifics of that choice eluded him. Terra was not someone he could read easily, even with a vague knowledge of his motives.

A cornered animal was almost less predictable in its intentions than an animal that was violent from the start. Morphling, Necromancer, Daybreak, even Blackhole, they were willing to resort to torture methods long before Grian came into the picture. This was normal for them. This was predictable. This was the result of a plan fueled by hatred and greed. In the end, they could be expected to make the same mistakes, whether under threat of death or not.

But Terra?

Terra would do anything to get out of his cage. He had that fire burning inside of him — a tension ready to snap. It didn't matter if he'd never been a violent villain, if he'd gone his whole life without harming another individual, if he'd been free of guilt and bloodlust up until that very moment, because he was boxed in now. So close to the exit, and the Bamboozlers were trying to shut the door.

He wasn't like his teammates. He wouldn't make that mistake. He wouldn't be predictable.

Grian should have seen this coming, should've known this was concocted by Terra. The heroes gave him medicine, food, water, a splint, but that wasn't done of their own volition. They wouldn't have thought of it without outside influence. It didn't make sense for their mindsets — why pull away from pain when it seemed like Ringmaster had already sealed their fates?

Only Terra could invent something so roundabout, so beyond the vet's understanding, in hopes of freeing himself. Because, in the end, that's what he wanted. It didn't matter how he got it, but freedom was the goal. Grian was a pawn, moved in accordance, but it was up to the guiding hand to deliver him across the board. If it suited Terra, he was able to be treated with kindness.

"Are you done eating?" Blackhole's voice barely registered. Grian didn't react. After several minutes, there was a sigh, and the clank of the metal cart shifting with added weight. "Alright. Someone will be back to check on you in, like, two hours."

Footsteps retreated. The lights flicked off. Hinges creaked, and the door clicked shut. Grian hung his head, and basked in the morphine flowing through his system.

At the very least, until Scar arrived, he wouldn't be in quite as much pain.

Nine hours left.

He really hoped he would last that long.

A thick blanket of clouds covered the sky, vast and dark. Wind rushed with a blistering chill, sharper, faster, colder than it had been just hours before. A storm brewed, the atmosphere holding its breath above the heads of the man standing alone in the parking lot.

The first flake of falling snow cascaded down to gently rest upon the bomb in Scar's hand. Its pattern evaporated, melting and sizzling the moment it came into contact with the encapsulating red glow.

"All good?"

Scar glanced over his shoulder. Lizzie clung to the shadows, the light of her mask the only illumination over her form. Her hair was up, out of her way, and her spear rested by her side, prepared to strike. She was ready for danger at a moment's notice.

"As good as I can be," Scar replied. "Is Jimmy in position?"

"Yes, he just pinged the comms," Lizzie said, but she was not over her initial worry. "How are your powers?"

Scar moved his eyes back to the bomb. The red glow was thin and dull, but stable. He felt every push from the timer, every urge towards movement that it tried to make, and held steadfast against it. Action, speed, movement rested in the palm of his hand, bending to his will. It would not overcome him, would not slip from him, would not fail him, so long as his focus remained complete. It was as natural as breathing, no matter how much time had truly passed.

Lizzie wasn't wrong to have her concerns, though. He'd been trying to use them whenever he got the chance, but it was undeniable that his stamina was not what it once was.

Scar eyed the timer of the bomb, perpetually stuck on a single second until detonation. For as long as the timer could not count out that final tick, it would not blow. He held it tighter, wound that glowing red around its forward momentum, the sparkling static of the electricity trying to break through a pleasant prickle within his veins.

If he kept it trapped within his control for too much longer, it would grow fiercer, feeling closer to the drag of a knife against skin than anything remotely bearable. The forces of nature would pull at his gut, punish him for disrupting their natural rhythm. It wasn't something he usually had to consider.

Unfortunately, without his usual stamina to produce more energy than his powers could possibly eat up through the course of one messy battle, strategy would be beyond necessary. Conservation of strength, only worthwhile uses of powers, just until he could ensure Grian was not in danger anymore.

"They'll last," he concluded, leaning more of his weight onto his crutch. "I'll *make* them last."

It was as much a reassurance for Lizzie as it was for him.

"I'll hold it for another minute." Scar readjusted his hold on the explosive. "Get into position."

His teammate did not respond, but he heard the receding of her footsteps, and knew he was alone. He counted off in his head.

At the same time, Scar ran through a mental map of every square foot of the building in front of him. The old community theater was

historical in all senses of the word — architecture spanning back a century, furniture consisting only of accurate recreations or antiques, and a foundation sturdier than anything modern could ever hope to be.

Unbeknownst to the public, beneath their beloved theater sat an elaborate stretch of tunnels, secret entrances, and reinforced walls. The Agency's nearly-forgotten safehouse had nestled into its roots, buried itself out of the sights of citizens and villains alike. It was too deep for heat tracers to detect, too sturdy to be bulldozed through, too camouflaged to be noticed by an unknowing eye.

Were it not for Furioso's insider information, the Bamboozlers might never have found it.

They might never have found *him*.

Grian was inside this building. Grian had become yet another secret buried beneath the surface of the theater. Grian was trapped by steel walls, enclosed on all sides by a reinforced coffin.

He was waiting for the Bamboozlers, waiting for *Scar*. From the phone call alone, Scar could tell his boyfriend was fading fast, hanging on by a thread, completely at the mercy of the enemy. It was impossible to know what they'd done to him, why they'd done it, what their reasoning had been for taking a civilian in the first place, but it couldn't be good.

And that was why they wouldn't wait around any longer.

No more searching, no more stumbling, no more curling up on the apartment floor, waiting for a return that wouldn't come. Scar had found Grian, and he was going to get him back.

His count reached zero.

Scar pulled his arm back, took a deep breath in, and launched the bomb forward.

Pure instinct and years of honing his abilities guided him towards his next reaction. The moment the danger was out of his hands, his focus shot to the form of his powers. Scar ripped off the safety net of stagnance, letting nature regain control over her domain for a breath, before he shifted the whole of his attention towards speed.

It took form behind his eyes, a red glow sharpening to a fine-tipped point, removing all external force from the air along its path. Scar pushed everything he had into making it go faster, faster, *faster,* until it was closer to a bullet than a bomb.

The wind whistled as the projectile shot out, crossing the length of the parking lot in less than a second. It hit the building hard, smashing through the marquee and slamming into the pavement in front of the ticket booth like a meteor into the crust of the earth.

No sooner had it made contact than the entrance of the theater was consumed by an unparalleled blast. Dawn cut through the shadows of night as a ball of fire and force exploded outward. Debris burst into the air, windows shattered, street lamps were struck down, and a flurry of flames were born from the destruction.

Ash coated the ground alongside freshly fallen snow.

Scar took a step forward. He had waited long enough.

The Gs would not see another sunrise.

Blackhole was not the person that opened Grian's door after two hours had passed. The vet had suspected that would be the case, had found himself anticipating Morphling or Terra's faces rounding the corner.

Daybreak was a bit of a shock.

At first, her silhouette was all he could see. She opened the door in silence, spilling light across the cracked floor. The overhead fluorescents flickered on as she flipped the switch, and Grian blinked back spots.

Normally, such a sudden brightness would have nauseated him, or brought with it an immediate headache. Luckily, the addition of nutrients back into his body and the effects of the painkillers left him with few repercussions. He was sluggish, slow to react, but no longer writhing in agony from just a few hours of proper treatment alone.

Unfortunately, as his eyes adjusted and he caught sight of the scarlet of Daybreak's cloak, his calm state fled.

His heart catapulted into his throat, lungs squeezing behind his ribs. Grian jerked, as if to push himself further back in his chair, but his legs were still bound by roots.

Daybreak's face was grim, her eyes hardened and shoulders slumped. The two scythe blades that had been ripped from their place a few

hours prior had since been remounted. They were poised on the backs of her forearms, ready for use at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, remounting seemed to be all the attention they'd been given.

Grian swallowed as he noticed dried blood coating the sharp edge of one, and the cut on his face stung for the first time in hours.

His mind conjured two possible reasons why she might not have cleaned her weapons before coming to visit him. On one hand, she'd been in terrible shape the last time he'd seen her. It was possible she had been too distracted by her own inner turmoil to consider something so small.

On the other hand, she might not have bothered to wipe off her blades because she planned on staining them again.

The vet tensed, shrinking under her gaze. Daybreak was almost as unreadable as Terra and Blackhole, save for the scowl that seemed to perpetually coat her expression.

Nothing about the look gave away her intentions, though. Was she here to kill him? To enact her revenge? To fulfill a new plan? To maim him until he was as good as dead already? Or was it none of those things? Was this just another confusing step towards a goal he could no longer predict?

"Good. You're up," Daybreak said, startling him out of his head. "I didn't want to deal with waking you myself."

As soon as she had finished speaking, Grian's lips parted in astonishment. His fear lessened, replaced with confusion and curiosity.

Her voice sounded *awful.*

Despite the vocal modulator distorting her words in their usual manner, Daybreak was quiet, almost feeble. There was a tremble to each syllable, an emptiness to every exhalation. She sounded completely hollow — no hint of bloodlust, rage, or overwhelming sorrow remaining.

“Out of the way now, love,” came another ringing tone, and a second figure appeared in the doorway. Necromancer pushed another little cart through the entrance. “We can’t waste too much time.”

As she stepped past Daybreak, their shoulders brushed, and the scarlet hero seemed to shift her weight into the brief touch. It was over before Grian could give it any further thought. Necromancer stepped in front of his field of view, blocking their teammate. On the cart, there was an IV bag. In the new light, Grian saw that the one currently attached to him was running low.

“How are you feeling?” Necromancer began the process of switching them out. “Have the drugs worn off yet? Do I need to get Blackhole to administer more?”

Grian was not inclined to answer. Unluckily for him, she didn’t feel the need to wait for a verbal cue either way. Necromancer nudged him slightly, and when he tensed against the pain that shivered through his veins, they knew the truth.

“Well, you’re not in tears,” they muttered, lips twitching up into a smile under their veil. “This much will work fine. Better not to overdo it.”

Silently, Grian found himself agreeing. For as much as he would've appreciated an extra dose of numbness, he didn't like the idea of feeling weak near these two. Besides, the last dosage hadn't fully run its course yet. Morphine — still supposing that was what they'd given him — would not vacate the body quite so quickly. He was not keen on making himself sicker with an imbalance of substances.

Obviously though, the painkillers *had* dulled, returning some of his regular motor functions, energy levels, and cognitive abilities. His thoughts felt clearer, and uncomfortability crept through on occasion, but it was closer to the state he had been in when he'd first arrived in his little prison. So long as Grian avoided jostling his injuries too much, then the medicine's usefulness had not yet expired.

"We don't have to move him yet, do we?" Daybreak peered over Necromancer's shoulder, watching as she finished messing with the IV. "Feels a bit early."

"No," Necromancer said. "No, I didn't bring you to help me with that."

Daybreak's brows furrowed, eyes shining with an overarching question. She might have continued to press for a different answer, but with a quick glance Grian's way, she seemed to decide it better to keep quiet.

Subconsciously, her fingers began to trace along the length of her curved blades — up to the pointed tip and down along the razor sharp edge again, keeping her touch just light enough to avoid breaking skin with a practiced precision. Though her gaze remained trained on the vet, there was a distance to the expression, like she'd tucked herself into her own head.

What beautiful, horrible, torturous image did Daybreak have playing in her mind when she looked at him? Was she picturing spilling his

blood across the concrete? Fertilizing cruel roots with his corpse? Listening to his final, wheezing breaths through a cacophony of broken ribs?

Her brows pinched together, a striking sorrow filling her irises, and she flinched away from the eye contact.

Grian's guesses came from an outside perspective, a biased hatred within him. He remembered her position, remembered what Scar had supposedly done hours prior, and allowed himself to slip into her shoes for half a second. It was only then that he knew exactly what she was seeing.

Her dogs, a voice in his mind hissed. It sounded achingly like Terra. *Her friend. All dead. Dead because of Ringmaster. Dead because of Scar. Isn't that sad?*

He'd been half-dead the last time he'd given thought to this situation. Since that point, he had regained a lot of his critical thinking abilities. If ever there was a moment for him to be horrified by this possibility, horrified by the sheer suggestion of such cruel deeds, it would've been then.

Grian waited for remorse to fill him, waited for guilt to flood his senses, waited to be hit with a wave of nausea at his partner's actions.

It did not come.

The hours, the painkillers, the food, the water, the return of his sense of self had changed nothing. Grian could not, for a single second, make himself believe that Scar had killed an innocent civilian, nor a hero's beloved dogs. He knew his villain. He knew his heart, his mind, his ways. He hardly needed to consider it for more than a minute.

This was a trick, plain and simple.

Although, with that, a new thought crossed through the vet's consideration.

His heart rate spiked, a tightness forming in his throat.

It was only a hypothetical, only an 'if' scenario, but Grian felt it like a sudden weight in his chest.

Staring at Necromancer and Daybreak, feeling little thrums of pain shivering through him as the former checked over his splint, he couldn't help but think…

What if Scar *had* done that?

What if Scar had killed those people — those animals — in the name of saving him?

Grian knew he was capable. He'd killed in the past. Scar probably wouldn't even feel the crimson addition of new blood upon his hands anymore. He was likely already numb to the sensation. Indifferent. Unbothered.

Scar *could* kill. Scar *had* killed. Scar was *capable* of killing.

It wasn't, for that reason, far-fetched to wonder if, maybe, under the

right circumstances, he might kill again.

And then, where would that leave Grian?

Grian, who had been overly preachy about the sanctity of life since long before meeting the Bamboozlers. Grian, who had dedicated years to learning the best way to heal those that could not heal themselves. Grian, who had barrelled head-first into a world unsuited for someone as powerless as himself just to save a man he knew to be violent and unpredictable.

Grian, who had been through hell for the past several days because of that decision.

After everything he'd seen, everything he'd done, everything he'd become, where did that leave him?

If, for whatever reason, Scar killed someone for him, how would he react?

Grian's throat bobbed as he swallowed.

He didn't know.

His heartbeat sped up.

He *didn't know*.

Sweat began to bead at his brow.

Oh *God.*

He couldn't breathe. No matter how desperately he tried, the oxygen wouldn't reach his lungs.

He didn't know.

There was only a single thing that seemed to remain constant and true for him — an anchor against the storm. Surety surrounded him about one fact: under no circumstances could Scar justify killing an animal. Not to Grian. The thought alone made bile rise in his throat. To him, it was unforgivable.

Why, then, did these feelings of his no longer extend towards *people?*

His mind spun, the reality of that settling upon his shoulders. Months ago, Grian would have been able to give an emphatic answer — murder was never alright, never justified, never something that should be enacted on his behalf.

But he'd changed. Loving a man with blood on his hands and a compassion that was overlaid by years of ill intent, he'd changed. Dragged through the border separating life and death again and again and again by those who wore the title of heroes, he'd changed.

Grian hovered on a new border, a new ambiguous line, a new moral grey area, and he saw the benefits of both sides.

It was an alarming truth that resided within him now — unfamiliar and uncomfortable and not quite right yet. Panic welled in his chest, his breathing picking up as a direct response. Necromancer straightened, ceasing her adjustment of one of his bandages with a confused hum. They seemed to think they'd been the cause of this sudden distress.

"Calm down," Necromancer said, irritation ripe in her tone. Grian bit the inside of his cheek, though he was far from able to hide his state. "Surely it doesn't hurt *that* much. I've barely touched you!"

"Geez, Nec," Daybreak hissed. "It's a check-up, not another interrogation session. Don't make things worse when they're already bad enough."

He didn't give the heroes any reassurances, didn't let either of them know that he'd been too lost in his dilemma to notice any pains. It was better they thought him agonized by a physical stressor. Still, Grian couldn't make himself relax. His breathing remained quick, gut stirring with raw uncertainty. He felt his nose scrunch, his brows furrow, his mouth turn down into a deep frown, but he was powerless to stop it.

"Damn it. I didn't *mean* to." Necromancer made a noise of frustration, and stood to her full height. They glanced at Daybreak, mouth opening and closing, hands gesturing at Grian fruitlessly. "He's just–! He's so–!"

Grian tried to count out seconds between breaths, tried to separate them by longer spans of nothing, tried to utilize old methods to make himself still. It didn't work.

"Yeah, I know. He's fragile. What do you want *me* to do about it?" Daybreak replied, crossing her arms over her chest, "I can't even cover

for you if this messes up some part of the plan. Terra's already mad at me."

"You're right. *God,* I guess I'll just have to do it myself," Necromancer relented, grumbling under their breath. Grian's eyes widened as the hero's attention turned to him. *"Listen to my voice."*

Power slipped into Necromancer's words, mingling as easily as the breeze intertwined itself with the clouds.

He felt something latch onto his heart, twisting and compelling his entire focus to hone in on her. The rest of the world seemed to disappear into the background, Daybreak along with it. His nerves would never usually have allowed him to forget about another threat in the room, but these were not usual circumstances.

"Calm," Necromancer said, whisper soft and saccharine sweet. *"You want to be calm."*

Grian felt intangible hands tug on the strings of his heart, puppeteering him according to a will not his own. A warm buzzing numbed his senses, wrapping the uneasy emotions in a vice grip — a snake around its prey. He didn't fight it, couldn't fight it, did not *want* to fight it.

Necromancer burrowed into his chest, found the place where his desires were hidden, and pinpointed what they needed with startling accuracy. She pushed it further, further, *further,* until Grian's breathing evened out, his muscles relaxed, and he could hardly think about anything but stillness. Their words echoed in his ears, *calm, calm, calm…*

In a single instant, his panic attack was soothed and dispersed. Grian

felt like he was floating in a pool of warmth and comfort. His own longing for calm had been manipulated and brought to the forefront, overriding everything else. It fit so naturally over his person that he struggled to care that his mind had been invaded.

By the time Necromancer pulled away, let their hold drop, Grian was so dazed that he hardly noticed.

The room was silent, three sets of breathing synced and sultry. Then, a cough rocketed off the wall, breaking some of the nothingness.

Grian watched through half-lidded eyes as Necromancer bent at the waist, and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Nec,” Daybreak hissed, rushing forward to catch her teammate before they could crumple. “Why would you use your powers? You’re barely recovered!”

“Oh, stop it,” Necromancer croaked, straightening again. “I’m fine. And now, he is too.”

From his angle, he could see slightly under the edge of her veil. Crimson dripped from the corner of her lips. The last time he’d seen them bleed, it’d been after several minutes of forcing the vet to admit things he didn’t want to give up. This was, in comparison, such a small use of her abilities.

For it to cause the same amount of backlash, they must have truly taken a heavy beating from manipulating Werewolf.

Grian’s heart swelled within his chest.

Werewolf *really* hadn't wanted to leave him.

Daybreak's brows furrowed. "I'm gonna grab you a cup of water. Stay here. Sit down if you have to."

"Alright, yeah, I get it," Necromancer muttered, but they leaned against the metal cart as soon as Daybreak took a step back. The scarlet hero disappeared out the door, feet moving quickly, leaving Grian alone with her teammate.

Silence fell over them again. The vet was still reeling from the otherworldly calm flowing through him, but Necromancer looked far less comfortable. Their shoulders were tense, mouth a thin line. A droplet of blood ran from their lip to their chin, only then being wiped away with an annoyed flick of a finger.

Grian was speaking before he could stop himself, "Does it hurt?"

It wasn't a wise question, judging by how it made Necromancer's head tilt. However, Grian's nerves were far too at ease to allow him to properly consider such things. He didn't feel the necessary shockwaves of fear that would have otherwise kept him quiet. Instead, there was only mild curiosity, the same that he always experienced when faced with these five individuals whom he did not understand.

Necromancer scoffed, "What do *you* think?"

While it seemed like she was not pleased with the line of questioning, the hero was notably not shutting him down entirely, nor were they retaliating. He had a hunch that, for whatever reason, Grian's physical condition mattered to them suddenly. It was the only reason he hadn't

been left for dead the second he admitted the truth to Scar over the phone.

And it would be the reason Necromancer entertained him for a single second now.

“I think,” Grian started, chewing on the question, running through a mental textbook. It was hard to come to a serious conclusion, though, when his whole mind felt like it was floating. “Internal bleeding is really bad. It probably hurts a lot.”

There were absolutely more eloquent ways to phrase that sentiment, but he couldn’t bring himself to spend energy on it. Deciding that was good enough, he let his chin drop to his chest, his neck tired from supporting its weight.

Necromancer snorted, “Wow, Doctor. You’re so wise.”

The nickname made Grian frown, a stabbing pain hitting his chest. It felt horribly pointed to hear it in his current situation. The Gs had used it on occasion, and not once did it fail to bother him. This was not the exception, especially after they’d heard it said over the phone.

Hot anger burned his cheeks, an accompanying loneliness joining in to scorch his lungs. The lingering effects of Necromancer’s powers faded, leaving a husk of a person behind. He wished he could give the feeling away, pass it off to someone else, continue to be numb and unbothered for a little while longer. He needed, at the very least, a distraction.

“You and Daybreak,” Grian started, reaching for the first topic that might come to mind. For better or worse, he recalled his earlier conversation with Blackhole. “You seem close.”

“Because we are,” Necromancer replied, not giving it a single second of thought. “You, of all people, should understand becoming friendly with your coworkers. Even if your situation is… strange…”

Grian knew the relationship to which she was referring, but his frustration had not dimmed. “You’re right,” he huffed. “I am very close to everyone at the clinic. I wouldn’t call them strange, though. Maybe just sleep deprived.”

At that, Necromancer barked out a sharp laugh. It bounced off the walls, loud and genuine. They brought up a hand, stifling a second before it could leave their mouth. Grian raised a brow, surprised.

“Oh, God,” she said. “I didn’t realize they had good humor on your side of the tracks.”

“Yeah, well,” Grian replied, quiet and a little dazed. “You didn’t exactly take the time to get to know me, did you?”

The mood fizzled out as quickly as it had arrived. Necromancer dropped their hand, lips turned down into a frown. “That’s for the best. It’ll make your end easier for everyone.”

His end?

So, they still wanted him dead. Soon, most likely, given their newly-imposed limitations brought upon them by Scar’s threat. Then, what was the point of treating him nicely? Giving him drugs, food, calming his panic? If he was always going to end up dead, why bother with any of that?

“Besides, I have everything I need with my team,” Necromancer sighed, standing up straighter. Some of her energy seemed to have returned. “Once this is over, and the city is safe from your group of thugs, everything will be alright again.”

Grian wasn’t given a chance to respond. Daybreak reentered the room, a cup of water in hand. “Here,” she panted, having rushed to complete the request as quickly as possible. “Drink.”

Necromancer took it gratefully and turned away. They pulled their veil aside, downing the entire glass in one large swig. When she faced Grian again, her face covering was back in place, and there was a red imprint along the rim of the glass. He couldn’t tell if it was lipstick or blood.

“You should go rest,” Daybreak told her companion, keeping her voice low. “I can take over from here. Not much else needs to be done, right?”

The other hero did not immediately respond, just staring blankly forward. It was impossible to see their reaction, but Daybreak seemed to understand what was going through their head all the same.

“You brought me here to get away from the chaos of the meeting,” she said, taking Necromancer’s hand and giving it a small squeeze. “It’s your turn to get a break. I know you think I’m crazy, but I won’t actually try to kill him the second you leave. Promise.”

Necromancer glanced down at their hands, then back up at Daybreak. After a long sigh, they nodded. “Fine. You win. Tell Morph I’m going for a power nap, and that I’ll be back in twenty.”

Daybreak snorted, tipping her head to the side. “Why should I have to? Your comms aren’t broken.”

A groan filtered through the air.

“You are *so* irritating.” Necromancer swatted at her, beginning towards the door while the scarlet hero laughed. “Be less combative for once in your life.”

They muttered a few other things to each other, too low for Grian to truly make out, then Necromancer left. He was alone with Daybreak, and rightfully unnerved because of it.

She rolled her shoulders, before giving her attention back to the vet. Amusement gradually fled her eyes, fading into a more neutral sorrow without her friend to balance her out. “So,” she said. “Do you need anything else?”

Grian bit his tongue.

“Not feeling up to talking anymore? Whatever,” Daybreak tutted. She crossed the room in three large strides. “Unfortunately for you, it’s my job to keep you alive for a few more hours.”

Grian startled when she knelt down in front of him, brandishing one of her massive blades.

“Stay very still,” she grumbled. “Or this may hurt.”

Fear wrapped its claws around his heart. Daybreak held up her arm, preparing to bring the sharp edge down with a strong force. His breath hitched, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Over and over again, he repeated to himself that they weren't able to hurt him yet, that he wasn't going to die, but it was hard to ignore preestablished anxieties.

He heard the whoosh of metal flying through the air, then a thump as something hit the ground.

No pain followed the sound. No part of his body had been sliced off.

The weight around his legs fell away.

Grian frown. Confused, he stole a glance, only to see the roots that had once encircled him retreating back into the ground. A piece had been cut, and now sat dead upon the ground at Daybreak's feet.

With those restraints removed, he was free to move again. Grian gaped down at the hero.

"Come on," she said, standing and holding out a hand. "Bathroom break."

He blinked. "I still… get those?"

Daybreak looked unimpressed, like that much was obvious, but it was fairly surprising to him. A few hours ago, he'd used a bathroom break as an excuse to try and escape. They had no reason to offer it to him again.

“I’m not worried,” the hero snarked. She took his uninjured arm and hoisted him up with only a little grunt of effort. The small stinging pains from the effects of unexpected movement on his injuries was enough to make him wince and hiss out a curse. Daybreak snorted. “Yeah, I don’t think you’re escaping in this condition. We’re safe.”

Embarrassing as it was, he had to agree. Still, he wasn’t quite ready for a long walk. Grian glanced over at the IV, specifically the spot where it had been hooked up to his good arm.

With one limb almost completely useless to him, he really didn’t need to be toting anything else around. Not to mention the layer of rust covering the wheels of the stand. Whatever closet they’d dug the thing out of, it hadn’t been touched in a while. Blackhole probably had to teleport just to get it to move at all.

The vet stole a look at the hero, who seemed unimpressed by the fact that he wasn’t moving yet. It seemed she had no intention of freeing him from the device. Blackhole might have medical training enough to attach a patient to a drip, but that didn’t mean he’d taught his teammates how to safely remove them. Grian figured asking for help from this particular individual might result in it being ripped out with very little fanfare.

“One moment,” he muttered, flinching as he shuffled his splint. “Let me just…”

His arm ached, but from his new angle, his hand could barely reach the connection point. Grian wished he had gauze or gloves or anything really to make the process more hygienic, but he’d done more with less in the past. As best he could — given how it strained his broken bones to move them — he started to pull the IV out.

He tried his hardest to keep it parallel to his skin and remain steady

while still going fast enough to keep the hero from intervening. It was uncomfortable, but not painful when done correctly. If Daybreak decided to involve herself, he doubted she would be half as kind.

Eventually, the tubing was removed. He hung the disconnected end on its stand, and pressed two fingers over the now-open spot on his arm. This was perhaps the most inconvenient part. He didn't have any dressing to cover the wound, nor any proper disinfectant. His subconscious would berate him for the foreseeable future should he leave it exposed, so he did his best to keep pressure on it.

Unfortunately, Daybreak's mercy had run out alongside her patience.

She planted a hand between his shoulder blades and pushed him forwards. Grian tripped over his own feet, stumbling for several steps. Given he didn't have the ability to even out his balance with his arms, it was a wonder he didn't fall flat on his face. His legs were asleep from having been stuck in one position for too long, and the painkillers still lingered heavily in his limbs. They were basically useless beneath him.

That condition only improved minimally as Daybreak walked him down the hall. The static feeling dissipated once he actually began to move. Even then, it remained a bit arduous, his muscles feeling leaden, but Grian was getting the job done. He knew the way now, so his escort stayed behind him while he kept his head down, trying to focus on keeping one foot in front of the other. The trip would just have to be slower than Daybreak probably would have preferred.

They did, eventually, arrive. Noticing something different, though, Grian paused in the doorway. His eyes landed on the window.

Previously, he'd knocked the entire thing out of the wall in order to fit his body through. That was always going to be a tricky repair, but he

was surprised to see that they hadn't really tried at all. Instead of a window, several layers of duct tape were all that separated him from the outside world.

A cold winter breeze blew through, lowering the temperature of the bathroom and conjoining hallway by several degrees. Just hovering in the threshold, he could already see his breath fanning out in front of him. Grian shivered, glancing over at Daybreak.

"Sorry, mate," she sighed, though she didn't actually sound apologetic at all. "It's the only bathroom in this section of the building. Not my fault *someone* decided to ruin its climate control."

It seemed the heroes were not completely above finding ways to inconvenience him yet.

He grimaced, but accepted his fate. If he wanted relief, he would have to deal with the poor conditions. The door shut behind him, and Grian began his subliminal mental timer of five minutes.

The vet did consider, for a single second, how hard it would be to attempt to climb through the window again. If his mental math was correct, the sun shouldn't rise for another several hours. The cover of darkness was his to exploit in that regard. Unfortunately, that was always going to be a lost cause. If he'd nearly passed out from the pain when he only had a broken rib, his newest injury was really going to be bothersome.

All his hopes for escape rested with Scar now.

Grian went about his business, using the bathroom, and avoiding looking at himself in the mirror. It was difficult with only one hand, but he managed well enough. He washed off his IV wound to the best

of his ability, careful not to get water on the bandages of his splint. It wasn't perfect, but it'd do for the time being. All the while, the winter nipped at his exposed skin, burrowing into his veins.

By the time he was nearly done, his nose and fingertips were chilled. He ran the tap water until it was warm against his skin, and splashed his face, basking in the momentarily solace.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come on," Daybreak grumbled. "Taking too long."

Grian dried his hands on the scratchy fabric of the towel, dabbing the water off his cheeks as well, before he opened the door. Daybreak straightened from where she'd been lounging against the opposite wall, and jerked her head back in the direction of the room.

"Let's go," she said. "A little faster this time, maybe?"

The return walk was not particularly warm, but anything was better than the frosty air of the bathroom. Grian focused on each step, trying to balance out the throbbing of his arm with an equal degree of distraction. Daybreak didn't help, boots scuffing in an uneven rhythm, never quite in line with his own. At certain points, the sudden increase in scuffing almost seemed like she was tripping over her own feet.

He glanced back at the hero as discreetly as possible, trying to understand her dilemma.

Daybreak also had her gaze trained on the floor, with her hands pulling at the edges of her mask obsessively. If he listened closely,

tuning out their shuffling movements, he swore he could hear her muttering under her breath. It wasn't loud enough to be audible, especially with the added interference from her modulator.

Grian jumped as blue eyes jerked up to meet his. An underlying disgust was burning in them, though it didn't quite reach the surface. Still, she sounded rough as she sneered, "Can I help you?"

"No," Grian muttered, facing forward once more. "No, not at all."

The door to his prison was just down the hall now, open and waiting for his return. Hesitation burrowed in his gut. Grian didn't have the energy to run again, to attempt an escape again, not by himself. Still, he knew what would happen if he returned now.

He'd be bound again, left in the dark, made to wait for his death — Scar's death, the Bamboozlers' deaths, the destruction of everything he knew. It was closer than ever before. No longer days away, no longer unimaginable. It lurked in this very hall, approaching slowly, and once he was in that room, he could only wait for it to reach him.

Subconsciously, Grian's steps shifted into tiny shuffles.

"Why are you stopping?"

"I'm not," the vet protested. "I'm still moving."

"Barely," Daybreak said. "Come on. Speed up."

“No, I think I’m fine with this pace.” Grian swallowed back his nerves. “It’s better for you if I take my time too, isn’t it?”

Daybreak crossed the distance between them in a single stride, appearing at his side, glaring into his peripherals. “What d’ya mean by that?”

He hadn’t really thought this through. Grian just didn’t want to go back to that chair, that darkness, that room.

The vet cleared his throat and dared to meet her eye. “Well, you did say earlier that you needed reasons to stay away from your meeting. A few extra minutes couldn’t hurt, right?”

Daybreak bristled, reeling back. She looked at him like she couldn’t believe he would know that, like it was only now occurring to her that when they spoke in front of him, he would listen. It didn’t matter that he was coming down from a panic, and then a subsequent unnatural calm, he was present.

The hero opened her mouth, brows furrowed, and began to speak.

Whatever she said, though, it was lost to a sudden, inexplicable rush of noise.

BOOM.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> I apologize if this section of the chapter has more errors that you are used to seeing. It's been the worst thing in the world to edit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An all-encompassing crash surrounded them in an instant. The drum of thousands of pounds of rock tumbling and the roar of flames bursting to life followed the echo of something Grian could only relate to the sound of a gunshot but *more.*

An explosion.

Though he'd never heard anything like it before, he knew what it was instantly.

The second the sound ruptured the air around them, the entire building began to quake. It was harsh, like the earth itself was splitting open beneath their feet. The lights flickered, hissing and popping out of existence one by one. Grian and Daybreak both startled as the one above them gave a wailing screech and blew. Sparks shot out from its dying form, forcing them both to duck. In a matter of moments, every overhead fixture in the hall had been lost.

Distantly, briefly, Grian thought he heard a scream. It was impossible to tell apart from the electrical shrieking of the power failing, but it ricocheted in his heart as something unnervingly human. But he couldn't dwell, not when the air in front of him had been overtaken by shadows and the present was as inexplicable as the past.

The shake of the structure's foundations was unending, even seeming to grow stronger with each passing beat. Plunged into an unfamiliar

world, Grian reached out blindly for support. He thought, vaguely, that he saw a wall in front of him, and forged forward. This was a strange darkness though — not the same as the kind he had in his prison, not the kind that came at night, but the kind that tricked its victim into believing light was within reach. The vet held his breath, waiting for his vision to adjust, but it didn't, wouldn't, *couldn't* with the total blackness surrounding him on all sides.

The rumbling continued to show no signs of slowing, and his already-weak legs had begun to tremble with a rhythm of their own. Grian was going to collapse if he did not find a crutch soon. He took a guess in one direction, tried to feel for a wall, leaned too far, and stumbled. A pit opened in his gut as gravity overtook him, pulling down, down, *down.*

He jerked, the collar of his shirt becoming taut unexpectedly. Before Grian could begin to choke, he was yanked upright and brought face-to-face with Daybreak. Her features were cast in a faint green glow, the only light in the entire hallway. It originated from a thin screen flickering over her eyes like a set of glasses. He saw then that her other hand, the one not working to keep Grian on his feet, was pressed against her ear.

"Daybreak to Morphling," she said. "What's going *on* up there?"

Grian heard the faintest sound of buzzing, and realized she was speaking over her communicator. Her brows furrowed, becoming something grave and angry.

"It's only been six hours, and Terra said they wouldn't try anything like *that* with the vet in the building," Daybreak hissed. Her grip on the back of Grian's shirt tightened. "How could they possibly be so confident that we're keeping him in our bomb shelter?"

She released him, and he stumbled back a few steps. Grian found the wall then, pressing himself against it. Though, it felt no more secure than standing without any support. Whatever had been bombed was actively in the slow process of crumbling into nothing, and it was not far enough away for his liking. He wished he could see past the barely-visible atmosphere of Daybreak's light.

Another stressful minute, and the trembling of their surroundings finally ceased. There was a new symphony of metallic groaning that floated in the air above their heads as a result of the rubble settling, but it was not nearly as loud. Grian no longer felt as though he was going to collapse at any given moment.

"Well, who gave them that information? It's classified, isn't it? Like, *super* classified?" She threw a hand up in the air, disbelief overflowing in her tone as she shouted, "How did they even find out that the safehouses *exist?"*

The vet perked up, blinking rapidly. Without the aftershocks of the explosion bouncing through his head, he finally managed to process some of the words she was dropping, and his interest piqued.

Bomb shelter? Safehouse?

Was *that* where Grian was? Was that why its architecture was so strange? Was that why there were no windows in his section of the building? Was that why it had taken so long for the Bamboozlers to find him?

A new realization poured over him like a bucket of cold water.

Oh *God.*

Had the Bamboozlers *found him?*

Were they actually coming for him *right that very moment?*

Was that explosion because of *them?*

Scar had said twelve hours over the phone, but only six had passed according to Daybreak. The Gs were scared, confused, hesitant. This wasn't part of their plan. The Bamboozlers had surprised them and this *wasn't part of their plan.*

Grian wanted to cry. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to pass out. Yet, he could do none of those things.

He leaned harder against the wall, chest rising and falling quicker and quicker.

Scar was coming. Lizzie was coming. Jimmy was coming. His Bamboozlers were coming, and they'd caught the Gs completely off guard.

Grian was going to be *saved.*

No more rotting in a windowless prison, starving, dehydrated, in pain. He could go home, go back to living a regular life, go back to comfort and safety and love and all he needed to do was get to Scar.

His escape attempts no longer had to get him away from the Gs, away from the danger, completely away from the building entirely. Scar was in the building. Scar was nearby. He just had to reach Scar.

Grian glanced around hurriedly.

How hard would it be to run right at that second? Was it safer to stay in one place and wait for Scar to come for him, or should he make a break for it at the first opportunity?

But it was still so dark. He wouldn't get far if he just took off into the shadows, especially with how little he knew of the place's layout. Besides, Daybreak had been a little too precise whilst stopping his fall earlier, so he wouldn't be surprised if those strange glasses of hers gave her night vision. She'd catch him before he could do much as leave her radius.

Staying put was his only option, then. Grian simply had to trust Scar would find him. He had done it once. Surely, he could do it again.

"You're right. We have bigger issues right now," Daybreak sighed. "I'm getting him back to his room, and I'll guard from there. Send updates when you can."

There was more buzzing, slightly louder, but she pressed a button and it quieted. She dropped her hand, and then her focus was on Grian again.

"Let's go," Daybreak said, jerking her chin presumably in the direction of his prison. "Don't get any ideas."

It was much too late for that. Grian was already having more ideas than he'd ever had before in his life. He couldn't *act* on them, but his entire soul was consumed with the urge to run, find Scar, go home, escape, anything besides comply with the demands of the Gs.

Daybreak must have seen that in his expression. She huffed, stepping forward and grabbing his forearm. Without wasting any more time, she began the process of dragging him down the hall. Grian stumbled after her, unstable and blind. If he wasn't certain she had some form of night vision before, he had to be after she navigated them back as flawlessly as she did.

The pale green glow illuminated just enough for him to see when they'd reached the doorway. He dreaded entering, feeling stifled just in its threshold, but he had no other choice. Scar would get to him, and everything would be fine. One reinforced door would not be the thing that kept them apart in the end. He could handle being stationary for a while longer.

Grian had one foot in the door when a shout had both him and Daybreak whirling around.

"DB, wait!" It was Necromancer's voice, though it sounded hoarse and was broken up by coughing. A second pair of glowing glasses were shone from down the hall. It was dimmer, though, worn underneath her veil. "You can't stay here — the explosion's a distraction!"

"What?" Daybreak stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"They're already in the building! Someone tried to lock me in my room, but I escaped in the commotion," Necromancer hissed, hurried. She kept checking over her shoulder as she walked. Finally, they got close enough that Grian could see they were limping. "You have to go."

“Go? I can’t just *go,”* Daybreak replied, though her tone was soft, confused. “Morph said I should stay here and protect this room until he sent the signal.”

“Screw the bloody signal!” Necromancer barked. They crossed the hall and grabbed Daybreak by the arm. “Terra told us to wait until they started their attack. It’s *here,* Pearl. If we wait any longer, it won’t happen at all.”

Necromancer turned towards him. Despite their eyes being hidden by their veil, Grian could feel the weight behind their gaze. It was heavy, desperate, pleading.

A shiver went down his spine.

He knew what was about to happen, and he was helpless to stop it.

“Obey Daybreak,” Necromancer said, melodic and smooth and wholly encapsulating. All semblance of raspy strain left for the brief moment that power filled the air. Her voice slipped in through his ears, surrounding his mind from the first syllable. *“You don’t want to cause trouble.”*

It was a command, not a suggestion.

When her words tapered off and quiet filled the air again, they remained with him.

His heart was held in cold, unforgiving hands, twisting and pulling at

him. He was molded more and more with each passing second, made to *listen,* made to *want,* made to *be* the person Necromancer decided was best.

Grian searched for the end of the rope, the end of the connection, the end of the stream of power that poured from Necromancer's lingering voice in his head into his very being. Before, with the questions, it had ended when she could no longer hold onto her manipulation, and when she'd commanded him to be calm, it had faded with time.

He could not find this command's conclusion. It felt open, ongoing, as if Necromancer were still speaking, still casting that spell upon him. They had imbued a level of power into this enchantment that he had not ever felt before.

But that couldn't be possible, could it? Rewriting his desires so severely that it became permanent wasn't something that could actually be done, right?

He had never heard of Necromancer doing such a thing, nor had he experienced it himself. This was a misunderstanding, another instance of him not grasping how abilities worked. The end would come, just as it had every time in the past. He would be free soon. Soon. Soon. *Soon.*

Although, a small voice in his mind whispered, *If that's the case, then why hasn't Werewolf come back yet? Wouldn't it have worn off by now?*

Fear seized him, tightening in his muscles, closing his throat.

Oh *God.*

He didn't *want* this. He didn't *want* to take orders from a hero. He didn't *want* to be controlled. He wanted to be free. He wanted to be at home, at work, with his cats. He wanted to be with Scar.

Necromancer coughed, doubling over. Her knees gave out and she began to fall.

Daybreak dropped her hold on Grian to catch her teammate. He remained still and static, as if so much as stepping back would be a violation of the command he was just given.

"Cleo!" Daybreak pulled the veiled hero into her arms. "No, no, no! Stay with me!"

A new name hung in the air, thick and completely useless to the vet. Names couldn't free him. Names couldn't release the new hold on his brain. Names couldn't bring him into Scar's arms. More pressing matters stole the forefront of his mind instead.

The lighting made it impossible to tell, but Grian knew Necromancer had begun to bleed. If his eyes were to be trusted, a dark shadow had overtaken the entirety of the hero's chin. The smell of iron filled his senses.

"You have to go," came Necromancer's rasping voice again. "Take him to the infirmary. Now."

"No!" Daybreak fought, "You're in *pain."*

"I'm fine," the other hero replied. "I'm not dying. It's just hard keeping up multiple of these enchantments at once."

“Then *stop,”* Daybreak hissed, teeth clenched and panic evident in the way she spoke. “We don’t need *either* of them anymore. I can handle the vet by myself, and Ren won’t be able to snitch in time to stop us. Drop it.”

Grian sucked in a breath as he felt the hold on his heart tighten.

“Leave, Pearl,” Necromancer snapped, louder than before. “Or I’ll *make* you.”

Hurt flashed through the scarlet hero’s eyes, because that was a threat she couldn’t ignore. Necromancer was not currently dying, but if they gave that final command, there was a very real chance they would not live to see the sunrise.

The lights overhead flickered, a red beam illuminating the space for half a second. It was blinding, enough to shock a small gasp out of Grian. For half a second, in the brightness, he thought he could see something move out of the corner of his eye. Before he could check, though, the shadows returned, and it was gone.

“The emergency power is going to kick in soon,” Necromancer whispered. “You won’t be able to hide in the darkness anymore once it’s on.”

Daybreak hesitated, eyes scanning her friend’s face again and again. For a second, it almost looked like she was going to disagree one last time, propose another solution, chime in with any sort of contrary opinion, but she didn’t get the chance.

A laugh broke through the silence of the hall, haunting and sharp.

“You should make up your mind soon, hero,” said a new voice. Grian glanced over in time to see the familiar red and blue glow of a gas mask turn the corner. There was a metallic *shing* as a blade was drawn. “Before you lose the ability to run completely.”

The backup lights flickered on, bathing the corridor and its four inhabitants in crimson. Daybreak’s eyes widened, Necromancer’s breath hitched, and Grian’s heart lurched into his throat, though not out of fear.

“Damn it,” Necromancer whispered. “We took too long…”

Eclipse loomed at the far end, spear glinting by her side.

She took a step closer, and the heroes flinched. Her blue eyes seemed to shine as they focused upon the two.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Eclipse hummed, mirth thick in her tone. Her gaze shifted over to Grian and softened. “Sorry for keeping you waiting, Grian. We’ll do our best to get this over with quickly.”

Then, she drew her arm back, and launched her spear forward.

It cut through the air in a flash. Speed and precision spun around its blade, sharp and unavoidable, aimed straight for Daybreak’s heart.

Necromancer was faster. They shoved their teammate aside in a split second and caught the handle of the spear, whirling it around to

redirect its momentum. She moved with such certainty that it looked as though she'd done this a million times. Muscle memory powered the hero through the movement even as their breathing grew more and more labored.

Grian gaped, a wave of awe washing over him. It'd been so quick that he hadn't processed it happening until it was entirely over. He hadn't witnessed any sort of combat with his own two eyes in ages, but this was closer than ever. To feel the wind of a weapon rushing past his face, not separated by the distance of a street or a television screen between them, caused a mixture of terror and adrenaline to cloud his thoughts.

Luckily for them, the heroes had a bit more battle sense than the vet. Instead of marveling over their past actions and remaining still, both Necromancer and Daybreak immediately assumed a battle stance, and just in time too.

Eclipse was in front of them faster than Grian could blink, clearly having used her spear as a distraction. She grabbed onto the hilt of her spear and pressed a button. It retracted out of the hands of her enemy, assuming its knife form. Necromancer was forced to jerk back to avoid their palm getting sliced from the sudden movement.

They collided in a furiously quick display of limbs. Necromancer caught a punch and jammed her knee into Eclipse's gut. The villain let out a loud gasp, but was spinning around and dislodging her arm before a second blow could come. Her next punch deliberately slammed the hilt of her knife into the hero's face, before rerouting to slash down at their arm.

It was a hit that never should have landed, but the ripping of fabric and the cry from Necromancer told Grian it had. Months of watching these battles unfold online or down the street from him had taught the vet enough. He knew just from looking for a few seconds that Necromancer was *slow.* It wasn't necessarily hard to be slower than

Eclipse, but this was an unusual sluggishness for someone trained by the Agency.

The source of that was, of course, impossible to miss. Grian still couldn't move. He couldn't call out to Eclipse — Lizzie, his *friend* — and he couldn't interfere. It seemed like keeping long-term enchantments like this one going continuously sapped energy from the hero, and they hadn't dropped it yet. Undoubtedly, the pain caused by that was still affecting Necromancer now, even if she was powering through for the moment to keep herself alive.

The other hero was here to remind Eclipse that this was still a two-on-one situation, though. Whilst the villain was distracted dodging a kick from Necromancer, Daybreak ducked down and knocked her feet out from under her. Necromancer saw this move coming and dove to grapple with Eclipse on the ground.

With a grunt, the villain pressed a button and her spear fully extended again. Necromancer slammed into it, attempting to pin Eclipse completely to the ground using its hilt, but was not strong enough to fully carry through the motion. Eclipse was rapidly regaining ground, only a few inches away from being able to shove her off entirely.

Necromancer recognized this and glanced over their shoulder. "Go, Pearl! Now!"

Daybreak winced like she'd been struck, but notably did not lunge forward to join in the fray. "I'm not leaving you!"

Necromancer's mouth straightened into a thin line. With a deep breath, they spoke again, *"You want to leave. You want to go to the infirmary."*

Grian could only watch as Daybreak stiffened, disbelief coating her expression even as Necromancer's powers fully wrapped themselves around her mind. It took only a split second, and then the scarlet hero was untensing and looking at Grian.

"The infirmary? What's at the infirmary?" Eclipse sputtered as a fist was punched against her gut. She seemed to fight twice as hard to get Necromancer off her, but the hero was not so easily dislodged.

Daybreak took a step closer to him.

"Come on, little vet," she said, her voice distant and muted. "We have a plan to complete."

At first glance, it seemed she'd completely forgotten about her friend. When Necromancer began to cough, managing only barely to keep Eclipse down, Daybreak didn't even flinch. She took another step closer to Grian and pulled at his arm. He moved against his will, only freed from the frozen trance of Necromancer's abilities by Daybreak's command, just as instructed.

"A plan? A plan at the infirmary?" Eclipse sounded hurried, strained. "Grian, don't go with them — we can get you out!"

You don't want to cause trouble, the voice in his head — Necromancer — repeated, *Obey Daybreak.*

"Grian!"

The vet tensed at Eclipse calling for him yet again, more desperate now. He couldn't turn to look at her, but *God,* he wanted to. His steps

slowed for only a moment. Necromancer coughed again, heavy and deep. The vet resumed his pace, tugged along by Daybreak almost robotically.

"Oh. I see," Eclipse growled, taking on an edge to her tone that hadn't been there before. It chilled Grian to his core. *"You* did this to him."

Necromancer cried out, and there was a loud thump. Without warning, something inexplicable inside of Grian called him to plant his feet and turn. It must have spoken to Daybreak too, because they both stopped to check over their shoulders. He sucked in a breath at the sight.

Eclipse was straddling Necromancer, a newfound rage in her eyes. The red light cast a shadow over her face, grim and unwavering. Her spear was inches above the hero's throat. Necromancer's hand on the hilt holding it back was all that kept it from driving through and impaling them completely.

She was trying to kill them.

Mere feet away from him, Eclipse was trying to *kill* a *hero*.

"Careful, villain," Necromancer croaked, but there was virtually no strength left in their words. Everything was going towards ensuring she was not immediately murdered. "I don't think your vet would like to see this very much."

Grian frowned, and Eclipse froze. In an instant, her head was whirling around to find him, forgetting her anger, forgetting her fight, forgetting her lust for blood.

Eclipse's eyes met his and widened, horror filling them. Slowly, her grip on her spear loosened. Grian wasn't able to warn her.

Necromancer did not hesitate. They jolted forward with a surprising energy, knocking the spear aside. It went clattering across the floor, landing mere feet away from Grian, who could not move to send it back. Taking full advantage of the villain's weakness and distraction, Necromancer tackled Eclipse to the ground. Their fight resumed with a new vigor.

"I'm sorry, Grian," Eclipse shouted, dodging a punch by only a hair. She did not try to reach for her spear again. His chest squeezed. Nausea rose in his throat.

Grian opened his mouth, tried to shout, but nothing came out.

Why not? Why couldn't he say what rested at the tip of his tongue? Grian was about to shout for Eclipse to stop, so why hadn't that been allowed? Surely, that wasn't causing trouble, right? Surely, that would be something Necromancer would want, right? Why would it prevent his interference?

Unless, of course, that *wasn't* what he'd been about to say.

Grian's jaw clicked shut, a mortifying horror spreading through his body.

It dawned upon him then that he didn't know what had been about to leave him. Was he actually going to demand Eclipse stop? Stop defending him, stop punishing his tormentor, stop doing everything in her power to help him, even if that meant killing a person?

No.

He *hadn't.*

Grian knew the shape of his lips, the syllables lingering on his tongue. They felt familiar, like he offered them to Eclipse — to Lizzie — often. They did not feel like a pleading mercy, or a horrified begging.

It's okay.

He'd been about to tell her that it was *okay.*

"Hurry," Daybreak beckoned again, and a wall bricked off his mind yet again. He was powerless to prevent his turning away, or his pace picking up to match that of the hero leading him.

Grian was led through halls he had never seen before. He heard the scrapping behind him growing quieter. Evidently, though, they weren't covering ground quickly enough for Daybreak's tastes. She paused abruptly, almost causing him to bump into her.

Then, she was wrapping an arm around Grian's waist. She had only done this to him once before. His breath hitched.

"Hold on."

He clung tightly to her, squeezing his eyes shut.

This time, however, he did not pass out the second they took off. Grian felt them lift from the ground, bobbing above it like a lure in water. Only then did the overwhelming speed kick in. Daybreak pushed off the nearest wall and shot forward in the same instance.

She soared through the corridors with enough speed to tangle Grian's hair and pull at his limbs. His eyes opened at some point during the mess, but there wasn't anything to see. His surroundings were a blur of red lights and reinforced walls. Sights were gone before he could even truly process their existence. He couldn't tell if the building was especially large or if the winding maze of halls was just arranged in a way that made them feel endless.

After about a minute, though it felt like an eternity, the wind became less fierce, and the blurring scenery calmed as Daybreak began to slow. It was much too late to prevent his head from spinning, unfortunately. All the blood had rushed to his skull.

By the time they came to a complete stop and the hero loosened her grip on him, he hung limply off her shoulders. Half of him was certain that looking around would cause him to throw up on the spot, and the other half wanted nothing more than to get away from her as fast as possible. The remaining morphine in his system probably contributed a significant amount to his disorientation.

Daybreak did not give him time to adjust, pulling back and leaving him to stumble into the nearest wall yet again. He blinked away the twister of confusion in his sightline, vision clearing in time to see a glowing sign above a large doorway. He knew it well, saw it every day before his life was stolen from under his feet.

A staff with one snake curled around it, poised as a symbol of medicine.

Grian could almost feel the serpent's teeth digging into his throat.

He glanced over at Daybreak, whose face had grown darkened and determined. The haze of control had left her, the command having reached its goal. Her eyes were already on him, aflame in the unnatural light. There was only one thing she could be thinking.

They'd made it to the infirmary.

They'd made it to the place where she intended to kill him.

"Go inside."

Grian swallowed against a lump in his throat. He could not disobey. The puppeteer's strings tugged at his limbs, one foot in front of the other, a hand against the door, a push to begin its creaking open.

The emergency lights did not reach inside of this room, as if the infirmary itself ran on a generator of its own. The fluorescents blinded him, pure white lights refusing to contrast their matching walls. Curtains acted as dividers between six cots, each with its own supply of the basic medical supplies — monitors, IVs, and carts of tools.

The sickeningly familiar figure of Blackhole already stood in the center of the room. "Good. When my comms didn't go through, I was worried you wouldn't come."

"Sorry," Daybreak sighed, sounding relieved. She shoved past Grian to join up with the masked hero. "We have to make this quick. Necromancer is holding back Eclipse, but that can only last so long."

“That can be arranged,” Blackhole agreed. His head turned to look at Grian, as if questioning why he was simply unmoving in the doorway. Daybreak gestured for the vet to come closer, and his legs obliged. Only then did Blackhole seem to understand, and lose interest in him. “Do we have eyes on the other two?”

“No.” Daybreak shook her head. “But our information gathered from Werewolf is now confirmed to work.”

Grian frowned.

Information gathered from Werewolf? Hadn’t he explicitly made sure not to give up anything of value to that guy? Not even Scar’s name had left his lips, so what could this be referring to?

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wonder over the answer for long.

“Oh? You tested it on Eclipse, I presume?” Blackhole rocked back on his heels, crossing his arms over his chest like this was something casual to consider. “So, they really won’t kill in front of him? That *is* a pretty useful weakness.”

Grian’s heart stopped.

Suddenly, he understood why Necromancer’s control had allowed him to turn around when Eclipse was trying to kill her. It was another part of their little game, a trick they’d kept hidden up their sleeves.

He was just a pawn in his friends’ destruction.

“I’ve got a station all set up,” Blackhole sighed. “But if you think it’s safer to take advantage of this new strategy…”

Exploiting an innocent civilian to keep *themselves* alive — that was what Blackhole was actually suggesting. They were debating on when to kill him. As if his life were nothing more than a convenient shield.

Maybe it was the fact that he was going to be murdered any minute now, but the Gs had begun to get lax about speaking around him. Identities, classified information, plans, and everything in between no longer mattered. Not that he could do anything with most of what he learned. Grian couldn’t run, talk back, cause trouble, and that seemed to be good enough for them to feel secure.

He couldn’t escape his own fate.

Grian wondered if he would even be able to cry like this.

With a knife held to his throat, a moment left alive, would he be in control of his own emotions? Or would Necromancer puppet him, fittingly, into the beyond as well?

“No,” Daybreak replied, firm as she took the green glasses off her face and tucked them away. “It’s too much of a risk. At least with our plan, we know it’ll work. Terra knows it’ll work. *That’s* what matters right now.”

“You’re right,” Blackhole relented, like that was just something he could do with Grian’s life — *relent.* The caring, good cop act was up, and it was replaced with an indifferent, clinical approach to an unspeakable action.

The heroes both approached a cot on the left, leaving him to watch from the middle of the room. Blackhole gave a flourishing gesture, as if presenting a newly-completed project to a friend. “Oh,” Daybreak gasped. “So realistic, and not a speck of dust left. You’ve outdone yourself!”

Exactly as Blackhole had said, this little area was different from the rest. There was a half-empty IV drip set up like it had been attached to someone for ages, and the blankets atop the thin mattress were mussed. A partly-eaten tray of food was balanced on the metal cart, so perfectly perched that it looked closer to something that might be seen on the set of a movie than anything else.

A stirring started in his gut.

He realized their plan far too late.

“Grian? Come here,” Daybreak called, and he was shoved forward by invisible hands. “Get comfortable on the cot, please.”

No, Grian’s mind screamed. *No, don’t!*

He was going to *die* on this bed. He was going to die with food and medicine in his system, and a perfect alibi for these heroes to look as though they were trying to save him. The perfect alibi for heroes that couldn’t stop the Bamboozlers from coming in and murdering an innocent they’d been attempting to rehabilitate.

It would explain their absence from the scene as necessary to allow them to keep a former kidnapping victim in some sort of witness protection program. And, when the Bamboozlers inevitably got

accused of murdering him, it'd provide the excuse for further murder that the Gs wanted so badly. It would achieve everything exactly like their original plan, but it would also accommodate their location flawlessly.

The white sheets, the white room — both delicately chosen to make his bloodshed that much more horrific.

He reached the side of the bed, glancing between the two heroes. Urgency buzzed in the way their fingertips twitched, and their gazes lingered. Grian set his hand atop the bed, preparing to climb atop it, when the driving tug of the command left.

Daybreak straightened. "Why did you stop?"

"This is as comfortable as I can get," Grian was made to explain, before he'd actually known the reason himself.

His other hand came up to rest at his throat, shocked by the outward revelation. Then, considering it, he realized it was entirely correct. He *dreaded* getting on the bed so severely that no further positioning was going to make him comfortable. And, technically, according to whatever laws were governing the powers puppeting him, he was still following orders enough to not be causing trouble.

"Irritating," Daybreak growled. "Fine. We'll do this the hard way."

She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and he let out an involuntary shriek. His body was thrown onto the cot like he weighed nothing. The mattress had practically no give, closer to a brick slab than a genuine hospital bed.

Grian grunted from the impact, every single one of his injuries flaring at once and blotting out his vision. He saw white, red, dancing colors as his brain fought to fire off a million signals in his pain receptors. His arm screamed, his ribs shifted, his burn itched, his head pounded, and the morphine could not counteract all of it.

When the blur in his mind cleared some, he noticed that he was being held down. Daybreak had restrained his uninjured arm on the right side of the cot, while Blackhole had placed himself on the left. “Don’t fight,” said the latter. “We’re going to make sure this is as painless as possible.”

Grian’s eyes widened. He noticed the needle in Blackhole’s hands, already filled with something and prepped for injection. The vet didn’t need more context to understand that was another dose of morphine. Just enough to prevent him from struggling, or trying to run in his last moments.

“No,” he whispered, throat straining. *“Please!”*

It was the largest protest he could manage. Necromancer’s grip tightened his chest and squeezed out his air. Blackhole brought the needle up to his arm. His hands were steady, practiced. Grian did not doubt he had done this before.

“For what it’s worth,” Blackhole sighed. “I *am* sorry”

“You don’t *look* very sorry from where I’m standing.”

Daybreak and Blackhole jerked backwards, whirling around at the unexpected sound. Grian’s eyes widened.

For the second time that day, he *recognized* the voice that spoke.

Unfortunately for them, the heroes were not able to process this newcomer's presence fast enough to react.

Blackhole was suddenly thrown to the ground, the needle falling from his hands and rolling into a corner. Daybreak dove towards it, trying to reach it before it could get too far. She was only able to watch as the needle cracked and crumbled into a million little pieces with a sickening *crunch.* The medicine spilled over the floor.

A man materialized overtop of it, his shoe firmly smashing the massacred tool. His eyes were shining, his posture relaxed. Confidence brimmed in his expression.

"Hey, G," Boogeyman said. "Did you miss me?"

Grian felt a smile rise to his face. If the enchantment weren't keeping him pinned to the cot, he would have leapt to his feet.

Jimmy.

Jimmy had saved him. He was here. There was still hope.

"Morphling," Blackhole panted, a hand pressing to his earpiece. Speaking up earned him Boogeyman's attention again. It was with a very hurried note that he finished reporting, "The infirmary has been compromised."

He had half a second to pull his hand away from his comms before Boogeyman was whirling on him and slamming the sole of his shoe into the side of his skull. Grian winced at the sound of yet another *crack* echoing through the room. For a moment, he worried that it was the breaking of bone, but the truth was thankfully less gruesome.

Blackhole was knocked fully against the floor, groaning with pain. Blood was seeping from a new wound along the shell of his ear, and the shattered remains of his comms fell to the ground. Grian knew what a blow of that force would do to the man — leave him dizzy, disoriented, maybe even concussed.

“It’s rude to be on the phone when someone’s trying to speak to you,” Boogeyman taunted, drawing his foot back and slamming it into the hero’s ribs. “Let’s break those nasty habits, hm?”

But there was only one of him, and two of them, just as it had been with Eclipse. Daybreak rushed to Blackhole’s defense. She swung out with her fist, a strike aimed for the villain’s head, but Boogeyman dodged at the last minute. His widened eyes indicated it was a near miss. Before she could right her mistake, Boogeyman’s form vanished.

Aside from his glimpses in the early days of knowing the Bamboozlers, Grian had never seen Jimmy use his powers in combat from close up. Everything he knew of the other’s fighting style was through news feeds and from what was joked about when they hung out. Lizzie and Scar never failed to beat him if they sparred, and while Grian didn’t understand how they did that, he’d assumed anyone with a higher level of training could detect the invisible villain.

His assumption was incorrect.

Daybreak swung out with her blades, her attacks random and uncoordinated. Blackhole scrambled to stand, despite his ribs almost

certainly aching by then, and took a similarly defensive stance. They did not pause to listen, still their breaths to catch the slightest hint of sound, or anything that Grian had watched Scar and Lizzie do over the months they'd been friends.

"He's gone!" Daybreak shrieked, like that was the most terrifying thing ever. "Where *is* he?"

Grian heard the muted scuffing of a boot off to his right, so faint that he almost didn't catch it. His eyes darted over, but there was only air. Neither of the heroes noticed his glance, nor did they seem to pick up on the shuffling.

Blackhole exhaled too loudly, and Daybreak slashed in his direction. She stopped before she could hit her teammate, but her scowl deepened. They turned their backs to Grian, certain for seemingly no reason that the threat was in front of them. They were jumping at nothing, startling at whatever mindless details their senses conjured up.

A touch brushed against his arm, brief and quick. Not expecting this, Grian flinched. Shortly after, however, he recognized it for what it was — a silent reassurance. Jimmy was next to him, simply waiting as the heroes drove themselves to the brink of paranoia.

The chair at Grian's bedside was lifted noiselessly into the air. Still, neither hero looked his way.

It was thrown at full-force, bashing both of its targets in the back of the head and creating a choir of pained screams. Boogeyman's laugh rang out, clear and true, even through his modulator. "C'mon, guys! Oldest trick in the book!"

Suddenly, the idea of one person taking on two didn't seem like much of an issue. Grian had forgotten that, at the end of the day, there was a reason the Bamboozlers had never been caught before.

"Alright, G. We're gonna get you out of here," Boogeyman said, whirling to face him while the heroes were down. He paused briefly to take in Grian's disheveled form with a poorly-disguised grimace. "*Yeesh,* you've seen better days. Can you walk?"

Grian opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came forth. He wanted to respond, though, *so badly.* His brows furrowed, energy focusing on the movement of his lips, but still nothing. When he forced himself to admit that wouldn't work, he tried to stand. Necromancer's powers glued him to the cot. No amount of straining was able to release him. He gave up, slumping uselessly into the mattress.

Boogeyman's expression grew grim, "Right. Eclipse said something was up. I was hoping she would have defeated that stupid hero by now."

Sucking in a breath, that truth occurred to Grian for the first time. If Necromancer were *defeated* in battle — whatever that word meant in this context — he would likely be released. For as long as he remained firmly under their control, it meant the hero had not been bested. Eclipse had not yet won.

But, similarly, for as long as Grian felt that chain around his heart, he knew it kept Necromancer weak. He'd seen the fatigue in their movements, seen the way Eclipse had taken them down easily. It was the only bit of power Grian retained in this scenario, even as his ability to move or speak was kept out of reach.

God, he felt helpless.

Across the room, Daybreak and Blackhole had gotten to their feet.

Boogeyman clicked his tongue. “I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Both he and Blackhole disappeared at the same time. Grian watched the latter *vwoop* back into view at his side, already swinging at the air. His fist caught the villain’s shoulder as he attempted to dodge with limited space, and it forced him back into visibility briefly.

However, Blackhole was not wearing his usual reinforced gloves, so the blow didn’t do its typical amount of damage. The movement worked against him more than it worked for him. Boogeyman took the opportunity to give the hero’s visor a solid right hook. It didn’t crack the front, but it did enough to tip Blackhole’s momentum off balance.

Grian held his breath, preparing for what he was almost certain would be Boogeyman’s next move — sweeping the hero’s feet out from underneath him and bringing this fight to the ground, knocking the wind out of his opponent again and again. Countless battles studied from the comfort of the vet’s living room had found that pattern, that natural next step, so he was surprised when it didn’t come to pass.

Daybreak tossed herself over Grian’s cot and tackled the villain. Boogeyman grunted as his own wind was forced out of his lungs. Sheer instinct must have been all that kept him alive, Daybreak’s slashing blades being stopped as Boogeyman caught her arm at the last second. His form flickered, as though he were attempting to fade from view, but it was well known that contact kept him visible.

“Why won’t you *die?”* Daybreak growled as she wrenched her arm out of his grasp. In doing so, she had to back off. It was enough for the

villain to get one leg between them, and to kick her off. She didn't go far, but it allowed him a chance to slip into nothingness, regaining his advantage.

"Dunno," Boogeyman answered, snarky and sarcastic from where he'd moved somewhere by the foot of the bed. "Not very keen on it, I suppose. Get back to me on a worse day, and I'll give you an update."

"Blackhole!" Daybreak shouted to her teammate, who nodded. He disappeared and reappeared over by a cabinet on the far side. Grian saw him grab a fresh syringe from within, seemingly already prepared, like they'd anticipated this scenario. Then, in the blink of an eye, he was back at the vet's side, a new dosage of morphine in hand. "Quickly!"

"Oh, no you don't!"

Blackhole's wrist was caught and twisted. Before the syringe could be dropped, he teleported a few feet away, leaving a now-visible Boogeyman standing in front of Grian. He ducked under a punch with an irritated huff of air.

The vet couldn't see Boogeyman's face from that angle, but the humor had left his voice as he asked, "What exactly are you trying to do here, huh? Why are you so insistent on giving him that?"

Neither of the heroes provided an answer, throwing themselves at him in a desperate attempt to keep Boogeyman from going invisible again. Working as a team, they had significantly more success. Grian winced as Boogeyman endured a knee to the stomach, and an uppercut to the jaw. Had Blackhole not been also playing a game of keep-away with the morphine, they might have genuinely beaten the villain.

Still, he ran the risk of being overwhelmed if this went on. Boogeyman's fighting style revolved around movement. He was going to get tired or hurt if he continued to hold his ground between Grian and the heroes. Though, they were both well aware that the heroes would be going for the vet's neck the second Boogeyman stepped away.

One more tanked blow, and Boogeyman was cursing under his breath. He dodged beneath a fist and removed something from a sheath on his hip. Though it had always been there, Grian had never actually seen his friend reach for it during a fight. "Screw it."

The steel blade of a knife glinted under the infirmary's fluorescent lighting for only a singular moment before it was immediately tinted red.

Daybreak cried out, stumbling back. A new cut bloomed on her upper thigh, shallow but painful. Blood was quick to seep forth, staining her pant leg and no doubt hindering her movement immensely.

Grian repressed a gasp, desperately trying not to steal his friend's focus. From what he knew, only Eclipse used a weapon in battle most of the time. Ringmaster and Boogeyman carried knives, but the former's powers were better spent on his fists, and the latter specialized in stealth over offense, so they were hardly ever utilized. To see it now was rare, and unbelievably terrifying.

"Great. Just brilliant," Daybreak spat. She drove her scythe blades forward, clashing against the knife and pressing forwards with all her might. "He's gotten his teeth out to protect his favorite little *pet."*

"Gross," Boogeyman hissed. "Don't even *imply* he's mine. Ringmaster will have our heads if he hears you jumping to conclusions like that."

Grian, despite the enchantment binding him in place and the weight of impending death upon his shoulders, actually laughed at that. It was quick and hoarse, but a bark of noise echoed around the room. Then, he lapsed into stunned silence, confounded by his ability to still make those noises.

He'd forgotten what it felt like to laugh — truly *laugh.* No amount of bitterness within it, just humor, however brief.

Leave it to Jimmy to make him realize that mid-battle. Unbelievable.

Boogeyman shrieked as Blackhole barreled into him from the side, stealing him from his grapple with Daybreak. Neither of them fell to the ground, the villain luckily managing to plant his feet just long enough to prevent that, but it allowed Daybreak to grab the upperhand as he was forced backwards. Her blade followed through, just barely cutting a line from Boogeyman's forehead and down his temple.

It was a severely inconvenient injury. Blood dripped into one of his eyes, obscuring his vision too much for him to continue to fight to his fullest. He hissed, shoving his knife forward towards Blackhole blindly. The hero pushed him back to avoid being stabbed. Its sharp edge still managed to catch his arm, ripping his jacket and drawing a bit of blood, but it was hardly significant.

Boogeyman let himself stumble out of the fray with the momentum afforded to him by the hero. He looked a mess — deeply in need of a second to recover, or at least to wipe at his eyes. Daybreak tried to engage him again, but he sidestepped her and went invisible. However, in taking that time, he was successfully kept out of range of the vet he'd been protecting.

Grian was forced to avert his attention away from his friend, because Blackhole was at his side. The syringe was not in his hands, but a few cuts and shards of what remained of it absolutely was. At some point in the heated exchange just a moment prior, it must've been broken. Boogeyman had not been entirely overwhelmed.

Either way, Blackhole didn't sound too upset about it as he called to his teammate, "I'm abandoning this plan, DB. The Agency can find a way to justify a murdered innocent on their own, whether he's found in the infirmary, or put there once his friends are already dead."

"Fine," Daybreak huffed. Her breaths came faster now, the wound on her leg likely becoming increasingly bothersome with the strain of fighting. "Just stay alive."

"You too," Blackhole said. "And make sure *he* doesn't."

Grian winced as an arm slipped under his legs and the small of his back. He was pulled up and into the air. Suddenly, the paralyzing fear was back. He locked eyes with Boogeyman as he flickered into visibility briefly, who looked just as horrified. They both knew what it meant if the two heroes were saying farewell.

There was nothing either of them could do.

He only had a second to breathe in, before the entire world disappeared. An inky blackness, deeper even than that brought on by Eclipse, encapsulated him — mind, body, and soul. Suffocation wrapped around his lungs, and vertigo tossed his stomach into his throat. It was like being buried alive, and simultaneously, something incomparable to any natural experience.

When the universe returned, it was like an exhalation. The pressure

released, the darkness fell away, the vertigo ceased to exist, and everything around Grian was different. He gasped for air, eyes darting to intake any details they could absorb. There was a large room in front of him, occupied by rows and rows of chairs. The smell of smoke was heavy in the air.

An auditorium, he realized, though his brain was still scrambling to process that he was not in the infirmary. His hands gripped at Blackhole's clothing, nails digging in like that nothingness might come for him again. Grian didn't feel corporeal, didn't feel wholly real.

What *was* that?

And also, what *wasn't* it?

Logically, somewhere inside, Grian knew they'd teleported. That was Blackhole's power, and it was no secret that their surroundings had changed. Nothing except teleportation could explain it. He knew all of this, but he couldn't fathom that something quite so wrong, quite so horrible, quite so *monstrous* might be a power wielded by a hero.

"Oh, whoops," Blackhole hummed. "Forgot to tell you to close your eyes. It's always rough to see beyond space for the first time."

Shakily, Grian's gaze swept over the purple visor in front of Blackhole's face. He saw it with a new branch of information — not as something to protect the other's identity, but to protect him from his own abilities too. It was a layer of separation between the nothingness and himself.

Blackhole lowered the vet until his feet stood on the ground, but he was not able to let go completely. Grian shook far too intensely to remain upright on his own. The morphine was waning, and his mind was filled with static. With his good arm tossed over the hero's

shoulder, he was turned around to face a massive, red curtain. A distant spotlight splayed their rippling shadows out against it. The wood of a stage creaked underneath their weight.

Where *were* they? How had they gone from a reinforced basement to the middle of a theater in less than a moment? How far had they traveled? Where were the Bamboozlers in comparison? How was he supposed to escape from someone who could drag him anywhere in the city in the blink of an eye?

The hero brought him forward. “Come on. Let’s make this quick.”

He reached over and pulled back the curtain, just enough for them to step behind it.

The backstage was dark. Not devoid of light, but cast in umbrage all the same. Grian could still make out shapes, like that of a long table spanning the length of the space, and various old set pieces pushed into corners.

Blackhole pulled him over to the table with large, self-assured strides. He didn’t fear tripping, like he’d navigated this particular area a number of times before. Once they were there, he shrugged the vet off, forcing him to lean on the surface in order to stay standing upright. He began muttering under his breath, the words too distorted by his vocal modulator to be audible.

From this new distance, and as Grian’s eyes adjusted slightly more, he could see there were objects strewn atop the table. Large shadows stood out in contrast, all different shapes and sizes. A couple of them glinted in the stray bursts of light that made it this far into the back, giving the impression that they were vaguely metallic. He reached over and touched one, recognizing something that resembled a handle, and maybe a piece of string. It was not something he could

make out solely by feeling it touch, though.

A significant amount of clanking and shuffling came from where Blackhole was standing. Finally, he seemed to find what he was looking for, and released a relieved sigh. “There it is.”

All at once, an overhead light flashed on, momentarily blinding the vet and illuminating the entire table.

Grian blinked away the black spots in his vision to get a better look at what was in front of him, and then immediately wished he hadn’t.

His stomach *dropped.*

Flashes of the past washed over him in the form of papers. Dozens upon dozens of papers, all sprawled out over his kitchen. Designs, notes, horrified faces, certain death scrawled in the margins, and the promise that these were only one sum of the greater whole.

But it wasn’t paper on the table before him now. These had shape, dimension, features. They had color, texture, purpose. They were neither concepts nor threats. They were real. They were tangible. They were sitting not a foot away from him. Countless piles of pages turned into reality.

Bile rose in his throat.

Weapons.

An entire room full of *weapons.*

Grian yanked his hand back from where it had been unknowingly running over the cord of a crossbow.

It was a large, looping thing, with enough notches in the handle for three bolts. Beside it, there was a massive sword, the edge ridged and uneven, like something out of a nightmare. To his left, there was a long stick, the end tipped like the kind seen on a stun gun. A switch on the handle seemed to allow for the customization of volts, but every single option was distinctly too high to be safely operated. A single shock from even the lowest setting would cause irreparable brain damage.

He already knew which heroes these had been designed to fit. The crossbow was painted orange, with leafy vines climbing along the handle to match Slayer's costume. The sword was styled like a katana — despite its different blade — like the current weapon Furioso wielded. And the electrified staff was just a less flashy, more deadly version of Morphling's own.

As Grian's eyes traveled down the table, he realized that every single piece was perfectly in line with something the heroes might hold. Exactly like those blueprints they'd found all those weeks ago. If there had been any doubt left in his mind that the Gs were being backed in their plan for independence from the Agency, this erased it.

Blackhole had paused in front of a massive pair of metal gloves. They were similar to the ones he already used, but the knuckles were spiked and sharp. A punch from the hero's regular weapons were already difficult to overcome, strong enough to rival even Ringmaster's enhanced blows.

A hit from *these* had the added, unnerving benefit of potentially

puncturing something at the same time. His opponents would be lucky if they walked away with only a broken bone or two. They would, honestly, be lucky to walk at all. Grian could picture the damage they would cause, maiming with even the least intentional of hits. Criminals wouldn't escape the Gs, but they wouldn't live through a fight against them either.

He expected Blackhole to go ahead and put them on. It made sense that he'd reach for the weapon that was clearly designed with him in mind. Except, his head turned, visor glinting as his unseen gaze landed on something far more rudimentary: a spear.

Blackhole picked it up, testing the tip of it with his finger. Blood beaded from his skin as he pulled away. The hero held the shaft with an unease that spoke of a lack of practice. The handle was too short, and the blade much thinner than anything meant to be wielded by such a large man. Still, Grian did not allow himself to mistake this as a weapon incapable of causing harm.

He knew why Blackhole had brought him here. He knew why Blackhole had chosen a spear.

Grian lifted a hand to his abdomen, feeling a sharp, blossoming pain as if he'd already been impaled. Investigators would look at the shape of the wound on his corpse, and assume Eclipse had run him through. That sort of evidence would be much harder to dispute than if his throat were simply cut.

"Stand still," Blackhole said, blank and monotone. "Like I said, I'll try to make it quick."

But it wouldn't be quick. Not like this.

If the hero was uncomfortable with his weapon, and he was aiming to stab, not slice, he would aim for the largest target. In this situation, it would be Grian's middle. He'd be impaled and then left to bleed out. He would feel every second of it. No amount of morphine would block out the sensation of death creeping over his skin, smothering him until he choked out his final breath.

He swallowed thickly around the knot in his throat and tried to take a step back, but the enchantment flared to life in his heart, forcing his movements to halt. Daybreak wasn't around to command him, but fleeing was within the realm of causing trouble, so he was held in place.

His knees shook with terror, heart moving at a million miles an hour. It was too much for his muscles to handle, and a second later, he was crumpling to the ground. The resulting impact as his knees hit the cold, splintered wood of the stage sent a shockwave of pain straight to his aching ribs, but he couldn't find it in himself to care anymore. Shivering, helpless, unable to fight back, Grian did the best he could to give the hero the smallest target possible. He bent at the waist to face the floor and hugged his middle.

God, he couldn't stand that he was *here* again, still waiting for death, even as he'd tasted freedom. He'd been *so close.* Jimmy and Lizzie had been within reach. But there was no possible way they could get to him in time to stop this, not when they were both still engaged in battles of their own. Grian wasn't going to make it out of this, despite the fact that the Bamboozlers were here, that they'd come for him, that they were putting their all into getting to him.

There was a sigh from somewhere above him, and boots entered his vision.

The vet didn't want to look up. He wanted to squeeze his eyes shut and pretend this wasn't happening. But he knew this hero. He knew that this man believed he was in the right, believed this was a means

to an end, believed this was only one gruesome step towards peace, and would do anything to avoid acknowledging the harm he was causing along the way.

So, remaining hunched over, Grian craned his neck up, and stared into that emotionless mask. He hoped every ounce of hatred was visible in his expression. He hoped that this damned hero felt every second of torn flesh and broken bone when he eventually drove the spear in. He hoped that moment haunted him until the day he died, littered with regret and abandoned by the city he once swore to protect.

Click. Thump.

Grian frowned, an odd, out of place sound catching his ears. Blackhole's head jerked up. "Who's there?"

Click. Thump.

It came again, echoing around the space, impossible to locate and slight enough to almost be brushed aside. If it weren't for the deathly quiet nature of the room previously, it might not have been heard at all. In some ways, the noise resembled a set of footsteps, but it was uneven to the point of obscurity.

"Morph? Terra?" Blackhole's grip on the spear tightened, knuckles going white. He whirled around in a full circle, but didn't seem to see anything. Grian looked too, but the overhead light's glare kept him from seeing too far beyond the man in front of him.

Click. Thump.

“Stay where you are.” The hero held out the spear, the tip hovering inches away from Grian’s throat. The vet swallowed, tense. “Or I’ll kill him.”

Click.

The noise stopped halfway through, as if that threat were enough to freeze the source in place.

Then, suddenly, there came a huff of what could only be described as utter disbelief.

“You can certainly *try.”*

Something shot out from the darkness, glinting red and shining like metal. The blade of a knife landed in Blackhole’s shoulder faster than he could ever hope to dodge. It embedded itself deep and clear and clean, slicing through clothing in a splatter of crimson.

The hero released a choked gasp, shocked beyond words. A moment later though, a wave of agony washed over him. The spear dropped from his hands, and he stumbled back against the table, screaming loud enough to shake the building.

Grian couldn’t breathe. His pulse hammered in his chest, mind dizzied by the sight of blood and that *voice.* His skull was an empty cavern, repeating the words over and over again, twisting them and hearing them until he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt. His ears rang so intensely with that choir of self-imposed obsession that he nearly missed the *thud* of something hitting the ground behind him.

Blackhole's head turned, looking past Grian. Despite his lack of expression, his shaking limbs and heaving lungs gave away the hero's complete terror. His cries of pain tapered off into a silence that was far more unnerving than any amount of noise.

Click. Thump.

Closer than ever before, the unmistakable balance between the falling of feet and the support of a crutch resounded through the theater, until it was less than a foot away from him.

The vet turned, gaze landing upon the figure he knew was there almost immediately. The sight of red and blue alone was enough to pull a sob from him. When Grian finally took in the newcomer's face, he was certain he'd died and been met with a vision.

Furious green eyes were locked on to the hero across from him. Hands were clenched with rage, one around the handle of his aid, and the other unsheathing a second knife from his belt.

"Go on. Try to hurt my vet again," Ringmaster growled. "I *dare* you."

Blackhole was stunned, unmoving. The villain's glare and the knife still embedded in his shoulder kept him frozen, silent, unresponsive, except for the occasional shiver.

Ringmaster's chin tipped down, and the air was stolen from Grian's lungs. Devastatingly familiar laughter lines crinkled beside softening eyes, settling into an expression Grian knew better than he knew himself. All the love in the world had gathered there, reserved solely for him.

“Hi, Grian,” Ringmaster whispered. “I’m sorry I’m late. I promise it’ll never happen again.”

The ground opened beneath his feet. Grian was weightless, floating.

Scar.

It was *him.*

Scar was *here.*

Not an imposter, or a figment of his imagination. He wasn’t going to wake up, or find faults. That was his voice, his smile, his adoration. This was really, honestly, genuinely him.

Tears pooled in Grian’s eyes, hot and stinging and full of nothing but complete happiness. He couldn’t respond due to the sobs that now shook his chest. Through the blurring in his vision, he saw the other man’s face crumple.

In an instant, there was a warm body kneeling at his side, and hands cupping his cheeks. Thumbs wiped away his tears. Grian’s heart squeezed harder at the gentle touch. He forgot every outside aspect of the situation they were in to fall into his partner’s arms.

It was impossible to hold it in any longer. Weeks of enduring torture, torment, solitude — and he’d never given into his emotions to this degree. Ages of staying strong, and finally, *finally,* he had someone to lean on, someone he could trust implicitly. Grian wasn’t alone anymore.

“It’s okay,” Scar said, propping his chin atop Grian’s head. No ounce of the wrath that made up Ringmaster remained in his quiet tone. It was just the two of them, no aliases or battles keeping them apart. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Grian believed him. There was never a world in which he doubted the man he loved. He believed him, and yet, he knew that couldn’t be entirely true. Not yet. Grian still couldn’t lift his arms, couldn’t wrap them around Scar, couldn’t move his tongue to form words. There was still an enchantment controlling him, even when they were this close to each other.

He pulled back just enough to stare into Scar’s eyes. Grian hoped with his whole soul that the other man could understand from that alone, because he was only able to offer this as an explanation. All else was caught in his throat, or buzzed in his frozen fingertips. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t gesture, couldn’t even really move from his spot.

“Don’t worry,” Scar said, soft and reassuring. The smallest bit of anger crept into him as he returned Grian’s stare. “Eclipse explained already. I’ll take care of this.”

Relief flooded the vet. Of course, Scar already understood. Of course, he was already ten steps ahead. Of course, the Bamboozlers were already taking care of things. Had the man across from him not been wearing a gas mask, Grian might have tried to kiss him — whether a hero was around to witness it or not.

Scar’s hands drifted down to give Grian’s shoulders a parting squeeze before he was standing again. A darkness fell over his expression as he faced Blackhole once more. It was like watching his partner switching bodies with someone completely different. The caring, calm man that Grian knew was replaced with a being of pure, distinct rage.

This was *Ringmaster* now, not Scar.

His watch was raised to his mouth and he spoke with chilling clarity.

“Good work, Bamboozlers. They were successfully flushed into the upstairs theater,” Ringmaster said. “Feel free to join us whenever you’d like, but I won’t need backup.”

Blackhole straightened, a groan leaving him as the movement caused the knife to shift. He stumbled back, away from the table and the spear he’d dropped. Ringmaster followed, unhurried. His crutch clicked as he walked, but his movements were comfortable, more than they were a few weeks ago. There was nothing slow or shaky about it. He’d obviously been practicing.

“Flushed?” Blackhole sounded rough, scared. “What do you mean *flushed?”*

“You heroes,” Ringmaster tutted. He spun the blade of another knife around his fingers. “You’re so predictable. Backed into a corner, and instead of getting to safety, you try to run to your little weapons.”

He stopped a foot away from Blackhole, and looked to the side, towards the table. A thin sword waited there — its blade not particularly remarkable. Out of all the deadly weapons around, it didn’t really strike the vet as something worth attention.

Ringmaster must have thought otherwise. Leisurely, the villain reached for it, setting down his knife to brush his fingers along the handle. The mild mannered gleam to his eye gave the impression that he was simply admiring the craftsmanship. His gaze remained averted,

transfixed, distracted for several seconds.

The vet was not the only one to notice Ringmaster's relaxed demeanor. Blackhole twitched, and from where he'd collapsed, Grian could see the hero had shifted his feet.

Without warning, he swung out with his good arm, aiming for Ringmaster's unprotected gut with his fist. Despite appearing not to be paying attention, Ringmaster sidestepped him. In the same instant, he picked up the sword and slashed along with the momentum of the hero's body.

The sword itself, which had seemed insignificant on the table, was clearly designed for such quick movements. It was light, cutting through the air with ease at the command of the one wielding it. Metal sliced fabric and into skin as if it were nothing, leaving behind a flurry of red.

Blackhole cried out and his feet stuttered. His hand flew down to his side, where he now sported a rather nasty gash.

Grian was only able to see the injury itself for a single beat before the man's blood gushed to the surface and covered it, but this wasn't a light scratch. No amount of simple clotting was going to fix the damage that had just been dealt. If the vet were responsible for treating such a wound, he would've concluded immediately that stitches were in order.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Ringmaster went on, sighing as he observed the fresh crimson that dripped from the weapon. "You're so used to playing on the offensive that you don't understand when your situation has changed."

The villain dropped the sword and picked up his knife again. It was clearly something much more natural in his hold. Blackhole watched him, chest heaving, but he hadn't moved yet. It was as though he were waiting for Ringmaster to move first, so he could react in turn.

"You've forgotten that you're the one being chased this time around," the villain hummed, words tinged with venom. *"I'm* hunting *you,* hero."

He leaned in, eyes shining, until his mask was inches away from Blackhole's visor.

"You should run."

Ringmaster stabbed forward with his knife, and Blackhole just barely managed to teleport out of the way.

He reappeared a few feet back, huffing and gasping for air. His hands were completely stained by his own blood. Grian saw his legs shaking, muscles quivering. Ringmaster watched him with all the amusement of a cat toying with a half-dead mouse.

"Figures," Ringmaster scoffed. "Even now, you're too proud to quit."

Blackhole made a noise like a laugh somewhere in the back of his throat, but it was warped and tired. His hand reached up and wrapped around the hilt of the knife in his shoulder. Despite how he surely knew better, despite how it must have hurt, Blackhole ripped the blade out and threw it aside. Grian winced. Blood rushed forward.

The hero shrugged off his jacket, and tied it tightly around the gash in

his gut. Ringmaster raised a brow, unnervingly quiet. Next, Blackhole ripped at the sleeve of his undershirt, and wrapped his shoulder too. It wasn't hard to see that he was preparing to fight again, no matter how broken his body would get from pushing it in this state.

Grian felt as if he were in his clinic again, staring into the eyes of a feral animal past the point of being saved, lashing out with the very last of its power. Blackhole wasn't stupid, wasn't running on instinct or amateur hope. He probably knew there was a chance he'd die here.

Still, he straightened, facing Ringmaster. "That's right. Why don't you humble me, villain?"

Ringmaster charged, and left with no other choice, Blackhole engaged him.

In the beginning of the fight, the villain did not stab or slash with his blade. He seemed more content to use its hilt as a blunt force weapon, while Blackhole put his everything into countering and dodging the attacks. Ringmaster was an endlessly forward-moving being, backing the hero closer and closer to the stage's curtain.

Grian's vision struggled to keep up with the mutual quickness of the movements involved in the fight. Blackhole was not quite up to par with the villain's speed, even with the crutch. However, he used his power more frantically, teleporting inches out of the way, or just over Ringmaster's shoulder whenever he could. It kept them as balanced as a greatly-injured hero and a furious villain were able to be.

Neither of them had infinite stamina, though. Blackhole's loss of energy was easier to see than Ringmaster's, as he began to grunt when more hits connected, and he couldn't teleport as often. From an outside perspective, anyone would think he was doomed in this situation.

But Grian knew Ringmaster better — knew his *condition* better — and there was no amount of physical therapy that could erase the strain his body had endured soon enough for him to be alright by now.

So, Ringmaster *was* growing tired. The only difference between him and Blackhole was that he was better at hiding his pain. His movements gradually stopped progressing towards the hero, beginning to focus on remaining stagnant and attacking with as few steps taken as possible. His crutch was relied on more heavily.

Notably, it was when Grian began to notice his dip in energy that Ringmaster's signature red glow flared to life, and the point of the knife turned onto Blackhole again. Suddenly, every hit had more power behind it, bruising speed tossing into every kick, every punch, every swing of the blade.

Blackhole failed to dodge a singular punch, thrown with increased velocity beyond what any normal human could've managed, and a sickening crack echoed through the theater. A spiderweb of lines exploded outward from Ringmaster's knuckles and across the hero's visor. It didn't shatter, but it sent him tripping over his feet with a startled cry.

The hero was forced to back up and adjust the way the face covering sat upon his head. He cursed under his breath as he did, saying, "God, how do you still have the strength to *do* that? Shouldn't you be limited? Shouldn't you be half *dead?"*

"Maybe you overestimated your little poison," Ringmaster huffed, before gesturing vaguely over his shoulder, towards where Grian looked on. The villain's grin bled into his speech as he added, "Or maybe you *underestimated* my doctor."

Grian's breath caught, heart thundering in his ears. They were talking about the poison, about Scar's recovery, commenting directly on the villain's state. It seemed like years had passed since he'd been seated beside the bed of an unconscious man, diseased and trying to die.

That poison was concocted by this very group. With access to a hero like Terra — whose control over nature gave him a comprehension of its thorns past what could ever be learned normally — they were able to perfectly tailor an illness to suit their needs. So, that was this, then? These were their needs? They wanted Ringmaster in horrible condition for this fight? If Grian remembered correctly, powers faded when they weren't used frequently, didn't they?

He remembered the painstaking process of bringing Scar back to life — retrieving him from unconsciousness with near constant care, endless time spent researching medicines, treating him with such consideration when he finally did manage to open his eyes. It was only due to that initial diligence that Scar had been almost good-as-new when the Gs decided to kidnap him.

Had he messed up a single time through those weeks, though, their situation would've been incredibly different.

Grian's gut churned.

They really *had* underestimated him. They'd assumed he wouldn't be able to reverse the effects of a poison that didn't exist anywhere. They didn't know that Grian would've charged headfirst into the afterlife himself and dragged Scar's soul back to his body if that's what it took, just for the slightest chance at keeping him around for a second longer. To him, failure had never been an option.

He dug his nails into the palms of his hands until their crescent indents began to bleed.

“We never expected you to die,” Blackhole said, slow and considerate of his every word. “But I won’t lie and say we expected you to be alright, either.”

Grian felt Blackhole’s gaze brush over him, but it didn’t linger for long away from his opponent. It was as if he were worried moving his attention would give an opportunity for attack, though Ringmaster could neither close the distance that fast, nor could he track the hero’s sightline.

Which meant that Blackhole was insecure, falling for the other’s bluff. He didn’t see the lethargy starting to creep its way into Ringmaster’s movements, or the careful spacing of his breaths to keep them from becoming erratic. And if Blackhole registered the crutch as something the villain was struggling to navigate around, he gave no indications of it.

Ringmaster was a showman through and through. He was used to being studied on camera. He was used to having to hide his flaws, and this was one of his tactics. Hiding a weakness with an increase in strength — a brilliant strategy. Someone who could not see his little tells would think he’d gotten *more* energetic, rather than less, exactly as the hero had.

When they reengaged, Ringmaster closing the distance and meeting one of Blackhole’s strikes, the hero took a far more defensive approach. They exchanged blows, but more was required from the villain to break through his raised walls. Ringmaster was happy to let a red blaze encase his knuckles again and again, never dimming as he kept his opponent on his toes.

Finally, Blackhole made a mistake. Grian couldn’t tell exactly what happened, whether it was a stumble or if he’d been tripped, but the hero toppled, landing hard against the stage. Ringmaster followed him

down, knee slamming into his ribs and knife pressing into his throat.

It could have been over in the same moment. Following through with a slash would have been so easy for Ringmaster, but he didn't. He paused, panting and glaring down at the hero.

"Why are you hesitating?" Blackhole's voice came out hoarse and choked. Grian tensed at the teasing edge to it, though. *"C'mon,* man. I'm sure your little civilian can handle it. Don't you want to show off how cool and evil you are?"

Ringmaster's brow twitched. He didn't look over at Grian, but the vet knew he wanted to. His knife pressed closer to the hero's throat, but everyone in the room knew it wasn't going to cut. It was exactly like the situation with Eclipse. For as long as Grian was around, murder was off the table.

Blackhole snorted, his smile audible as he said, "DB mentioned you Bamboozlers had a weakness. I didn't realize it was *this* perfect."

The villain's shoulders tightened. Blackhole shook his head, as if he weren't frightened in the slightest by the way the action left an indent of the knife's edge in his skin. A large, pained sigh left him.

"I wish I were still able to care about my cause the way you do," the hero whispered. "But I lost that passion a long time ago. I'm just trying to win because it's what my team wants now. I hope you understand."

Then, he disappeared.

Ringmaster cursed, falling forward as the man he'd been leaning on ceased to exist. With his balance disrupted, he wasn't able to readjust his crutch in time, and he hit the ground at an awkward angle. Grian winced, as if the strain were in his muscles instead of his partner's across the room.

As quickly as he could, Ringmaster gathered up his strength to prop himself up. His eyes scanned the room, but found no sign of the hero. "Where did he *go?"*

A presence at Grian's side was the only warning either of them got. The vet's breath hitched at the feeling of cold metal against his throat, sudden and sharp. He noticed then that the knife Blackhole had thrown aside earlier had since disappeared — only to be rediscovered at the same time as the hero it had once impaled.

"Grian, stand up."

Blackhole's voice was almost as much of a shock as his threat. It was hoarse, barely audible at all. He was slurring his words, sounding almost like he was on the brink of passing out. Still, Grian was unable to cause trouble. If Blackhole wanted him to stand, it was all his body could manage.

Ringmaster was watching the two of them, eyes narrowed in a display of pure hatred. He neither moved nor spoke. Somehow, his silence was worse than any biting response. It meant the villain saw a need to stay entirely focused.

Puppeteered up, Grian's torso ached and his arm twinged. Despite knowing the earlier shot of morphine would've made him a much harder target to rescue, he sort of wished he could've had another small dose. He feared how painful this experience would become should it drag out long enough for the last bit of numbness to wear

off.

Strangely, though, the knife against his throat didn't scare him as badly as it should have. Something about the way Blackhole was holding it, light and just barely close enough to be threatening, told Grian he wasn't intending on following through. It made sense. For as long as the vet was alive to bear witness, the hero wasn't able to be killed by Ringmaster. He'd made it clear that he intended to use that to his advantage. This was a precaution.

Still, Grian didn't let himself feel totally at ease. People on the brink of death were unpredictable, exactly the same as animals. If he believed this to be the end, Blackhole could decide to bring Grian down with him. No, it was better to keep his guard raised and his mind alert.

With a nudge from Blackhole, Grian was made to shuffle closer to the table containing the vast amount of deadly weapons. Ringmaster watched. His expression did not change. He did not try to stand up. The vet wouldn't be surprised if he'd reached the same conclusion as Grian.

The hero sucked in a breath, audible only to the vet standing so close to him, as he found something upon the table. Grian couldn't see exactly what it was, but it didn't remain a secret for long. A slight beep could be heard, alongside a short buzz of radio static, and then Blackhole was speaking.

"Gs, this is Blackhole," the hero started, not even trying to hide the panic in his tone. Grian and Ringmaster both stiffened. A spare communicator was the last thing he needed to find at that moment. Ringmaster shifted his weight like he might try to get off the ground, but the knife pressed closer to the vet's neck and he stopped. "I need immediate backup in the upstairs theater. *Hurry.*"

He didn't seem keen on waiting for a response. As soon as the message was out, Blackhole was feeling around the table some more, fingers fumbling. None of the weapons seemed to be what he was looking for, though, so the moment stretched on. His breathing was growing more labored by the second. Where Blackhole's chest pressed into his back, Grian thought he could feel the sticky warmth of blood escaping its bindings.

Briefly, Grian wondered if it was the constant use of his powers that had strained Blackhole's body to the point of such loud fatigue, or if the blood loss was simply that bad already. Neither option would surprise him. Ringmaster was kept away now, but he'd already done his damage.

"Ugh," Blackhole sighed. The knife retreated for half a second, then returned. "This'll do."

Grian stole a glance down at the hand holding the blade. His eyes widened at the sight of a pair of brass knuckles worn atop them. Not exactly the most technologically advanced weapons on the table, but they were probably pretty close to what Blackhole was used to working with. The replicas of his gloves were too far down to be a feasible option, so these would, like he said, have to do.

Ringmaster eyed them, and then his gaze dropped to the knife. He seemed to consider something, before gathering his crutch and beginning to stand.

"Stay down," Blackhole barked. The vet released an involuntary gasp as he was held tighter. "Or else."

For some reason, that demand brought back a spark to the villain's eyes. They crinkled with undisguised amusement.

“Or else?” The villain clicked his tongue. He did not stop his movements, even as Blackhole pushed the weapon closer to his hostage’s skin. Grian took shallower breaths. “Please. We both know you won’t do it. Not as long as you think he’s protecting you.”

Ringmaster straightened to his full height. He and Blackhole were similar in stature, with the latter being just the tiniest bit bigger. The difference was impossible to see from the angle of a civilian. They were simply two villains of two overlapping stories. One leaning heavily on the façade of good, and the other on a crutch decorated by evil.

“I’m not sure why in the world you’d expect me to actually listen and stay down,” Ringmaster continued leisurely. “You think I’d allow your friends more time to get to us? Assuming they’re alive, that is.”

Blackhole growled, “They’re alive.”

“Really? Are you certain?” The villain tilted his head. “Did they respond to your little message just now?”

Grian didn’t remember hearing that buzz earlier that usually meant voices were coming through, aside from right as the device was switched on. However, he *did* remember leaving two members of the Gs alone with two very angry Bamboozlers. No witnesses would’ve been there to save them after he’d gone. There was no telling what was unfolding beneath their feet.

Necromancer’s power still gripped at his heart, but this hero couldn’t feel that, didn’t know for sure. Neither of them could feel Daybreak, an unknown existing just past their realm of knowledge. And where, through all of this mess, had Morphling and Terra gone?

Blackhole was tense behind him. “They’re alive.”

Teeth gritted, posture tense, a white knuckle grip on the knife. He didn’t sound sure. He *wasn’t* sure.

Grian felt metal scrape against his neck in shaking hands. Nerves of his own grew as the room’s temperature seemed to drop. He drew in a sharp breath and succeeded in getting Ringmaster’s attention on him. The villain’s eyes tracked a new bead of blood as it dripped down the blade’s edge. By the way his brows raised, it seemed like he saw a vision of the future that Grian did not within that crimson.

“Really?” Ringmaster took one step forward. The hero’s hands were shaking. “Would you bet your life on it?”

Blackhole went still all at once. The hero’s hand twitched. His knife pressed in deeper, and Blackhole took a breath.

Suddenly, Grian understood.

This dying animal had just realized it was in a corner. It was going to *bite.*

“I’m sorry,” the hero whispered for the hundredth time since they’d met. It felt like all Grian ever heard anymore. “Goodbye.”

It was the most warning he gave. All at once, Blackhole jerked, arm pulling back to gain slight momentum for the flow through. Grian’s heart dropped.

And then, a light flared to life in front of his very eyes. Red and bright and encompassing Blackhole's arm in its entirety.

The hero was stuck. He could not move. He could not cut. He could not kill.

"That's *enough.*"

Ringmaster's voice was cold, drained of emotion. He took another step forward, and with the red light holding his arm, Blackhole could not do anything to regain that distance. Grian felt the hero's breath hitch as the villain reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"I'm not enjoying this game anymore," the villain said. Blackhole's form flickered like he was attempting to teleport, but after a few seconds, it seemed he could go nowhere. "We're done."

The knife was pried out of its frozen grip. To prevent it from being stolen again, Ringmaster tucked the dreaded weapon into its sheath again. Then, with no amount of gentleness, he grabbed Blackhole's arm, yanking it roughly away. In the same instant, Grian was taken and pulled behind the villain.

Blackhole tried to steal him back with his free arm, but then the red glow flared brighter, and his momentum sped up against his will. He was thrown backwards violently. Grian thought he heard a pop somewhere in the mix — likely Blackhole's shoulder getting forced out of its socket.

Nowhere else to go, the hero landed atop the table, knocking an uncomfortable amount of deadly weapons to the ground.

His chest rose and fell shallowly, but he did not move again.

"Sorry, G," Ringmaster said, startling the vet. Those green eyes fell on him, worried and a bit sad. "I would've ended it sooner, but I needed a minute to recover. Are you alright?"

A hand raised to press gently against Grian's throat, where he'd been nicked. It stung, but he didn't even attempt to pull away. Not from this man. Never from this man. Never from Scar.

When the vet opened his mouth, he expected the powers holding his chest to weigh him down, steal his words.

"I'm better now."

The sentence tumbled out so easily that Grian didn't process he'd actually said it until his partner's eyes were widening across from him. "You *spoke."*

"I did," Grian whispered, awestruck.

"Does that mean Necromancer is–?"

Ringmaster didn't have to finish his sentence for Grian to understand the meaning. He stopped, and made himself think about running away. The chains binding his heart firmly grounded him, no weaker than before.

They weren't dead, then. He shook his head.

The villain frowned, glancing over his shoulder at Blackhole's limp body. He seemed to be out cold. "What command *exactly* did she give you?"

Grian went to respond, but the words caught in his throat. He found that, no matter how easily he'd been able to speak a second ago, he could not elaborate now. Not about this. The command about causing trouble seemed to be uncertain of how to react in a situation where Blackhole was non-responsive.

The vet sighed and shrugged. Ringmaster nodded, understanding.

Still, even if that couldn't be admitted, and he couldn't will himself to run away, Grian knew intrinsically that he *did* have more freedom. His uninjured arm was capable of moving around, enough to allow him to reach up and place his palm on Ringmaster's — on *Scar's* — chest, enough to allow him to feel the steady heartbeat waiting there.

Grian stared up at the other. In the dim lighting, it was difficult to make out his favorite features of Scar's face, but those crinkled eyes and that messy hair doing its best to remain slicked back were enough to warm his heart. His boyfriend was far from innocent in appearance, though. Almost every piece of his costume was stained red, blood that wasn't his own filling the air with the ever-present, cloying scent of iron.

Scar was tired, beaten, bruised, but he was *here.* He was close enough to hold, real enough to keep, safe enough to trust not to leave like every other pleasant thing Grian might once have had within this horrible building.

And he'd never looked so handsome.

"The cameras," Grian heard himself say. "What happened to–?"

"Went off with the lights," Scar replied. "Tango took care of it. Why do you ask?"

An idea bloomed in the vet's mind, something so horrifically irresistible that he simply had to act. Days spent dreaming of this chance, of what he'd do when he finally had this man in his arms again. It didn't matter that they were both in pain, stuck in enemy territory. He was not going to let this slip through his fingers.

"Grian?" Scar's voice was small, confused as Grian lifted his hand and reached behind the villain's head. He found a clip there, and undid it without a second thought. Scar startled a bit at the feeling of his mask coming loose. "Grian, what are you doing?"

Despite his uncertainty, he did nothing to stop what was already in motion. The gas mask hissed as it detached from his face and fell away.

At last, after weeks of being deprived, Grian was allowed to see Scar's full face. Full lips parted around heavy breaths, cheeks flushed from exertion, discolored skin decorating his jaw, the vet took him in like a man starved. It was hardly an appropriate time, but Grian had already spent months by Scar's side waiting for the right moment, he wasn't going to hesitate for a second longer. Adrenaline soared through his heart.

He dropped the mask and grabbed Scar by the collar of his shirt. "Excuse me for what I'm about to do."

Grian crashed their lips together, desperate and messy and far too fast. His arm twinged, his back ached, his ribs stabbed against his lungs, but he didn't care. He kissed Scar like the world was ending, like the earth beneath their feet was crumbling, like it was the last thing he would ever do.

Scar did not so much kiss him back as he collapsed against the contact. The moment he registered lips on his, he slumped into waiting arms, wrapping his own around his love's waist and tugging him closer. He was careful, of course, not to trap the vet's splint between them, always aware of those sorts of things. Fondness taking over, Grian reintroduced himself to every curve of his partner's mouth, every divot in his rough lips, and adjusted to the iron taste that had not been present in any of their previous kisses.

A soft, content hum echoed out between them, rumbling in Grian's chest. A dizzy, heavy feeling hit him, and he forced himself to pull away. His lungs burned, having significantly less tolerance for actions that might disrupt his breathing in light of his broken rib. He winced, holding on to Scar tighter as he waited for the worst of the pain to ebb.

"Careful, careful," he heard his partner whisper. A kiss was placed atop his head, and then another on his cheek. "You're not exactly in tip-top shape right now."

"Yeah, well," Grian huffed out, probably against his best interest. "I missed you. Sue me."

Scar pulled away just enough to meet Grian's gaze. His eyes had grown glassy and his lips trembled. The smile that spread across his features was rife with sorrow. "I missed you too."

“Oh,” Grian whispered. His uninjured hand came up to cup his partner’s face. He wiped away a stray tear as it fell. The sight of it alone made emotions thicken in his throat and well in his heart. Were he not so dehydrated, he might have cried too. “Scar…”

“Ah, sorry,” Scar apologized through a watery laugh. He wiped at his eyes, sniffling. “This is *not* the time. We can’t stay here. The other heroes will be on their way.”

Grian heard him, knew how dire their situation was, but he still lingered. He couldn’t imagine what Scar had been through without him there — the fear, the guilt, the anger, undoubtedly, but the loneliness, the façade of strength, the creeping anxieties were bound to have haunted him as well. Scar was being too sweet towards Grian, taking all the time to comfort him and giving himself no moment of reprieve.

Scar *was* right. They didn’t have time. But as soon as they did, as soon as they were out of here, Grian was going to do his best to deconstruct every wall, repressed emotion, and unspoken worry until Scar was free of them. They just had to get somewhere safe first.

Grian leaned in and kissed the other man, short and sweet, simply because he could. Scar chased his lips as he pulled away, like he could not bear the thought of parting, but they were not given a chance to reconnect.

A crash from beyond the curtain caused both of them to spin around, suddenly alert. Pounding footsteps followed. Scar’s mouth pulled into a thin line. He scooped his mask off the ground and refit it over his features in one hasty movement. As quickly as the disguise had been dropped, he became Ringmaster again.

“Blackhole?” A shout echoed around the room, and Grian tensed.

“Blackhole? Where–?”

“Necromancer,” Ringmaster whispered, not even attempting to hide his disgust. “Perfect.”

He took Grian by the hand and tugged him towards the side of the stage, where the shadows were thickest. Not a moment later, the curtains threw themselves aside to reveal a figure clad in a familiar black costume.

Ringmaster pulled Grian to his chest and placed a hand over his mouth, a nonverbal request for him to stay quiet. He nodded, and together, they watched Necromancer stumble into the light, the curtains falling shut behind her.

The first thing Grian noticed about them was their limp. Every step looked like it pained them, and movement took a great amount of effort. She tripped forward, head whipping around to try and find her teammate. Grian knew the exact moment her eyes adjusted to the strange lighting, because she let out a scream of pure horror.

“Impulse!” The hero darted towards the table, towards the limp body of their friend. They took his shoulders and hoisted him into an upright position. Gloved hands jumped around, surveying his different wounds, half-wrapped and still bleeding profusely. “Impulse, *no.”*

Grian’s brow twitched.

Impulse — that had to be Blackhole’s civilian name, just given how Necromancer was shouting it. Another for the tally of classified information that he’d accidentally come to know.

He watched the hero lift her fingers to Blackhole's neck to find his pulse. A shaky breath of relief shuddered out of them. The guy wasn't dead yet, even if he was well on his way to that point.

Necromancer, however, was in absolutely no state to drag him to safety. The fact that they were able to stand upright on their own at all was impressive. Grian squeezed Ringmaster's arm for support.

"I found him," they said, hand lifted to their earpiece. In the silence of the room, Grian thought he could make out the buzz of a response. Necromancer sniffled, hurriedly responding, "No, he's in bad shape. He might not… He needs *help."*

Ringmaster shifted back by a single, silent step. Grian frowned into the hand covering his mouth. His eyes followed the movement to find the edge of the curtain was not far from them at all. If they could, by some miracle, slip around it unseen, they could make a break for the exit without alerting their enemies at all.

"I *can't* get him myself," she gritted out, like the admittance pained her. "Eclipse, she… is stronger than I remember. I had to lock myself in the vault and use the emergency hatch to escape her. Where are the others? Where are *you?"*

So, that was how she'd gotten away from her opponent. The vet was relieved to know it hadn't been due to Eclipse actually being overpowered in some way. He strained his ears then, as if somehow, he might be able to decipher which of the Gs was speaking to Necromancer. It was impossible, of course, to tie any face to the insect-like static whirring from around the hero's ear.

"Well, hurry," Necromancer spat. "I don't know how much longer we have."

Ringmaster took another step back, being very deliberate with the placement of his crutch. Grian allowed himself to be moved alongside the other, but both tensed as they felt the old wood of the stage sink beneath their feet. It didn't creak — not yet — but it wanted to. If their soles had landed a few inches more to one side, it might have given them away completely.

This was a risky attempt. Stealth was nearly impossible under their current restraints. Waiting Necromancer out wasn't going to be an option, though. She was calling her teammates, and if any of them were left standing, they would all be coming in this direction. The chances of not being spotted, and of escaping once spotted would be significantly lower with more heroes in the vicinity.

Necromancer reached out and gently touched one of the impromptu wrappings Blackhole had tied. Immediately, the unconscious man's body tensed with pain. Every inch of him had to be crawling with agony by that point. They dropped their other hand to their side, seeming to give up on their comms in favor of gently shaking their friend.

"Come on, big guy," they hissed, so much desperation in their tone that Grian almost pitied them. "Teleport us outside. Just outside. I can do everything else. *Please."*

The movement earned them another, far more hoarse groan, but Blackhole did not stir. Even if he had been conscious though, Grian was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to teleport them anywhere. It required far more energy than he had at his disposal.

Ringmaster took one more, unbelievably lucky step.

Blackhole let out a louder moan of anguish of his own accord, arm jerking and knocking something metallic to the ground. Ringmaster capitalized on the opportunity by backing them up several steps. Necromancer didn't hear the creaking floor over her friend's pain.

Grian's heart shot into his throat.

Were they both in better health, he would've suggested just throwing caution to the wind and making a break for it. Necromancer was hardly in the right state to chase, especially now that they were fretting over their dying teammate.

They were so *close*. He could see a sliver of the auditorium past the curtain's edge. Escape was within reach. Just a little bit more, and then, they'd be *out*.

But he shouldn't have let those thoughts cross his mind. He should have known better. Grian should have remembered that there was still one distinct barrier keeping that freedom locked away.

As he fantasized about how badly he wanted to run away, the chain around his heart *tightened* all at once.

Necromancer gasped, a hand shooting up to clutch at her chest.

Ringmaster tensed. Terror drove the air from Grian's lungs.

Slowly, that veiled face turned, until Necromancer was looking right at them.

"You," she hissed, her snake-like voice slithering into Grian's skull. The distance suddenly felt meaningless. They might as well have been feet from him with how suffocating the air became. *"You* did this to him, didn't you? What part of *'don't cause trouble'* did you not understand?"

With every word, the powers holding him hostage strangled him further. His spine was straight, limbs pulled taught, lungs bringing in only the minimum amount of oxygen. He didn't know what was wrong with himself until he saw her knees buckle, and the hero had to lean subtly against the table to avoid falling.

Necromancer was feeding into her own powers, reinforcing the command that already held him.

Ringmaster tried to pull the vet back a few more steps, but Grian was frozen in place. His feet refused to pick themselves up off the ground, and his mind was a loop of *don't cause trouble, don't cause trouble, don't cause trouble.*

As quickly as it'd returned to him, he'd lost his autonomy again.

He swallowed. Distantly, he registered Ringmaster releasing him to shake his shoulders. "Grian? G?"

God, he couldn't believe this. With a single thought passing through his mind, he'd screwed over their chance at a clean escape. How many more times did these heroes have to use him as a pawn before they got sick of it? How much more did he have to endure before they let him go home? How long would it take for these commands to wear off and forget him?

"Ugh. You heroes are so *irritating,"* Ringmaster growled. He dropped

his hold on Grian completely to reach for his knife.

"Ah-ah," Necromancer tutted. "I wouldn't do anything reckless while your vet's under my control."

Ringmaster recoiled, nose crinkling in disgust behind his mask. He unsheathed his knife anyway, bringing it up. "You can't do anything with that power if you're dead."

He started towards her, crutch clicking with each step, but the hero held up a hand.

"I *can,* in fact," Necromancer rebuffed. Her chin tipped up and she turned her attention back towards Grian. "Don't look away from me. If he kills me, you will witness it in gruesome detail."

Grian's eyes widened. The words themselves didn't have any of her ability woven into them, so it wasn't a command, but Ringmaster didn't know that. And even if he could hear the difference in her tone, he didn't know exactly which commands the vet had been given previously. For all he knew, Grian might have to obey Necromancer's every whim.

Ringmaster tensed, whirled around to check Grian's expression, searching for the truth. But Grian was unable to move, or to refute the statement. To do so would cause trouble for the heroes, so the chain tightened ever further and stole it from him.

It was *infuriating.* This one stupid weakness was being exploited for the millionth time, and it was all his fault. His Bamboozlers cared too much about him to prioritize their safety over his comfort. The heroes were beating them bloody because they were too scared to kill them in front of him. They were getting away with everything because of

him.

And for what? It was too late to keep him away from the ugly parts of their world. He was already wading knee deep through the underbelly of the political game played by heroes and villains. He was already a bartering chip, already hanging on for dear life. It was too late to keep him sheltered, free of nightmares, free of pain.

Grian wanted to speak to Ringmaster more than anything. He wanted to tell him that it was okay, that he'd thought about it, and he wouldn't hold it against him for doing what he had to for their sake. He wanted to move and talk and run and leave this whole horrible place behind. He wanted, wanted, wanted, *wanted.*

"Agh!" Both Ringmaster and Grian were taken aback as a shout of pain echoed around the theater. Necromancer fell against the table, hands scrambling for purchase, and coughs shattering the tense silence. They heaved for breath, just barely managing to right themselves before they could reach the floor. "You little… *pest!"*

Necromancer extended a shaking hand out towards him, and then made a sharp jerk upwards with her palm. Grian felt something in his chest snap, and he gasped, the weight on his shoulders immediately lightening. Some part of her control had been released.

He tried to open his mouth, or take a step, but those functions were still out of his control. Whatever she'd done, it hadn't cut off the command that kept the majority of the power over him. Process of elimination told him which of the two had been cast aside.

"DB wasn't using it anyway," Necromancer huffed, confirming his suspicions.

Ringmaster still didn't understand what was happening, though. He

squeezed his knife, eyes narrowed into slits. “What’s your goal here, hero? You can’t win anymore.”

“Any situation can be salvaged, no matter how bad,” Necromancer spat. “You taught us that when you clawed your way out of death.”

“Seems like that really bothers you,” Ringmaster said, no amount of friendliness in his tone. “I keep hearing about it.”

“You have *no idea* how much of a hassle it was to tap into Slayers comms system without alerting Furioso just to get her to fire that one *stupid* arrow,” Necromancer replied. She pushed herself away from the table and staggered a few steps closer. Grian could see the blood she hadn’t bothered to wipe away as it dripped down her chin. “All for you to turn out perfectly fine.”

Ringmaster went still.

“You… what?”

Grian’s eyes widened, his mouth dropping open in silent shock.

Oh God.

He’d forgotten. After so long of being exposed to this information, it’d slipped his mind that the Bamboozlers didn’t know. Ringmaster *didn’t know.*

They didn’t know how long the Gs had been planning this, why they were going to such lengths to achieve their goals, how desperately they had been trying to kill Ringmaster in particular. Maybe they’d

put together bits and pieces, like how the villain hadn't seemed surprised to see the lethal weapons in the heroes' possession, but they didn't have the picture he did.

"It doesn't matter what you know, not now that it's all gone to hell," Necromancer muttered. "We were going to frame you all for the torture and murder of your little civilian pet here, and use that as justification for us to kill you."

Ringmaster sucked in a breath. "Frame us for…"

"We needed to do something that would be bad enough to get us politely released from the Agency," Necromancer told him. "Without landing us behind bars. Easiest way to ensure all five of us are free of our contracts at the same time."

"Why?" Ringmaster's voice had gone quiet, become distant, like he couldn't believe it. "Why would *you* leave the Agency?"

Necromancer scoffed, "We were tired of being overlooked and constantly managed, obviously. Forced to allow ourselves to be beaten time and time again for the sake of the Agency's stupid moral code, when killing you would rid the city of your destruction far more efficiently."

Grian glanced at Ringmaster. He thought he could see the man's shaking. Whether it was from rage or fear, he didn't know.

"Sure, maybe the magazine covers favor us, but in that suffocating place? Only idiots who live and breathe their ridiculous rules get an ounce of attention," the hero went on, agitation clear in the curling of their hands into fists. "It doesn't matter that Furioso and Slayer have failed to arrest you fools endlessly. As long as they follow that

protocol, they're the Agency's golden children. If we ever want a chance to be recognized, it won't be under that umbrella."

She exhaled, long and drawn out. Her shoulders relaxed, and they sunk into an intimidatingly calm posture.

"But it's fine. Even if you escaped with some stitches the first time, and a limp the second, we've been watching you. We know now," they said. A single, gloved hand rose to point at Grian. "We know that *he's* the only reason why you could do any of that. Without him, you lot are *nothing."*

Ringmaster jolted, as if the acknowledgement of Grian reminded him of their positions. He hurried to step between the hero and civilian, cutting off their sightline to one another. Grian was grateful for the barrier, but he heard Necromancer click their tongue, and it filled him with a new unease.

However, her annoyance was interrupted by a loud noise from the auditorium. The squeal of hinges and the slamming of metal against a wall — the door practically being torn from its hinges. A shout accompanied it not a moment later, "Where is he?"

Necromancer, Ringmaster, and Grian turned at the sound of Daybreak's voice. They were not made to wonder at her sudden appearance for long. A gust of wind hit the curtains as her form shot through them, landing hard atop the wooden stage. Dust jumped into the air around her, and for the briefest second, the vet could smell smoke.

The newly arrived hero spun around to survey as much of the space as possible. She froze as soon as her gaze landed upon Blackhole's crumpled form. The entire city must have heard the cry of absolute despair that ricocheted from her lungs.

Daybreak crossed the room with an inhuman speed, pushing through the limp caused by the cut on her leg, but her hands paused before they could make contact. She hovered above her teammate, horrified and shocked, every muscle in her body wound tightly, like a rubber band waiting to snap. “I came as soon as I heard, but I wasn’t fast enough,” Daybreak muttered. “Is… Is he–?”

“No,” Necromancer said. With how Ringmaster had shifted, he could barely make out the veiled hero’s face then. She hadn’t turned away from her opponents, but her tone was gentler. “He’s not dead. Not yet. But he does need help.”

“Right,” Daybreak replied, quiet. Something in her seemed to strengthen. She set her hands down, very carefully attempting to roll Blackhole over into a more manageable position. He groaned, and she stopped.

From the way Ringmaster had begun to shift his weight from foot to foot, Grian could tell he was getting antsy. Most likely, he wasn’t pleased that the heroes were making an emotional scene out of this, as if they were the true victims. The vet, quite frankly, couldn’t blame him. He had no remaining sympathy for the people that’d made his life hell for weeks.

If Blackhole was left to bleed out, unable to get proper help from any members of his team, then it was really only payback for everything they’d tried to do to the Bamboozlers. It was hard to think they didn’t deserve it.

As time went on, Grian was learning quite a bit about himself. Before all of this, it was easy to imagine himself in the shoes of the noble comic book hero, swearing off murder for the sole reason of it making him as bad as the people he was fighting. It was easy to imagine he would make the same choice, noble and sacrificial and choosing

justice through the law over the ending of a life.

This new version of himself was not a good person.

This version wanted to veer off course — wanted *worse* than what was already unfolding.

He glanced over towards Ringmaster, to the knife in his hands, and the short distance between them and Necromancer. Grian wondered if she could sense how badly he *wanted* her *dead.*

“Come *on,”* Necromancer hissed, looking away just long enough to gesture towards the curtain. “While you still can, fly him out. If you see Terra or Morphling, send them here.”

“Are you coming too?” Daybreak glanced over her shoulder, scanning her friend up and down. “You’re–”

Her fretting was cut short by a blade soaring through the air. Daybreak only barely managed to dodge in time to avoid it burying in her gut. The two heroes gave their full attention back to the villain. He was leaning down and removing a third knife from within his vest.

“If we’re done chatting,” Ringmaster said. He twirled the new weapon through his fingers. “I’d like to get this over with now. Run, or I’ll make you regret it.”

Offering them the option of escape, even when it probably pained him to let these monsters walk free — Ringmaster was taking Grian into account with that.

“Go,” Necromancer insisted, ignoring Daybreak’s worry. “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure this ends here.”

Daybreak glanced at Necromancer, and despite her furrowed brows, nodded. Silently, she gathered Blackhole’s torso into her arms as best she could. The shaky exhale the man let out was more disconcerting than any of his agonized groans. His teammates seemed to recognize this fact as well.

Gradually, her feet began to float up and off the ground. The hero waited until Blackhole was also dangling off the ground, before kicking off the table and soaring through the curtains as quickly as she could with the added weight. They heard the door open and close a moment later.

Three remained.

Necromancer cleared her throat. *“Grian?”*

Grian tensed. Ringmaster lurched forward, raising his knife to throw, but he wasn’t fast enough.

“You want to stop him.”

The vet didn’t have time to react. Faster than he thought possible, his hand was reaching out and catching Ringmaster’s sleeve. With one firm yank, the villain’s aim was pulled off course. The weapon buried itself in the wood at their feet, and Ringmaster fumbled to keep hold of his crutch as his balance was disrupted.

Only then did Grian process what he had done. Only then did he see the shock in his partner's eyes. Only then did they both realize what Necromancer was planning.

"Grian," that hissed tone came again. *"You want to stop him from ever throwing a knife again."*

Grian felt a wave wash over his mind. He felt a sudden urge to prevent further violence, to get in the way. Even though he knew that wasn't *his* inner voice, it sounded so *sweet.*

He felt the enchantment slithering through his mind, wrapping around his thoughts, heightening his wants, moving him according to their will. His desires warped before his very eyes.

You want this violence in general to stop, his own brain tried to justify. These were his own, but wrong, off by a few degrees. *Of course, you should also want Scar to never have to wield a weapon again. Those things go hand-in-hand. This command is reasonable. You want this.*

He didn't. He did not want this. Grian knew that wasn't true. Maybe he wanted to escape, but he didn't want to interfere with his partner to make it happen. His head throbbed, the enchantment hooking into the crevices of his thoughts, pushing back against his every argument.

Grian stumbled, just barely managing to catch himself before he could fall. Ringmaster sucked in a breath.

The worst was far from over.

"Break his arm."

Necromancer didn't waver as they gave the direction. They instilled their words with that same, familiar power that had once only been used to make him answer questions. It had felt unnatural then, when it'd simply forced him to spill secrets.

This command, though…

This was *vile.*

It filled his mouth with the taste of iron, and his gut with an unfathomable nausea.

He moved.

He did not *will* himself to move, but *he moved.*

Grian grabbed Ringmaster's arm more firmly. Then, he raised his broken arm and held him with that as well, despite how the tension made his body crawl with pain. His vision blurred as the ache rolled through his veins. An involuntary cry escaped him, pushing past the silence of the enchantment with its sheer urgency.

"No," Ringmaster said, panic filtering into every part of his visible expression. "No! G, don't listen to her!"

The command pulled on the strings inside his head, and Grian felt his arms yank. He knew, intrinsically, what his body was attempting to do. All he had to do was get Ringmaster's arm in an awkward position, and with a bit of pressure — *crack!*

It wasn't exactly as simple as the instructions in his head made it seem, though. Ringmaster was not going to stand by and allow this to happen. He dropped his crutch to free up his other arm, though it had to be inconvenient. It clattered to the ground, leaving Ringmaster to shift onto his good leg. Grian's unbroken wrist was grabbed to prevent it from tugging anymore.

Immediately, the vet could tell his partner was holding back. The fingers holding him weren't tight at all, were hardly even trying, probably for fear of hurting Grian further. He knew what it felt like when Ringmaster really meant to hold him still. Months ago, in his kitchen, that red glow had stopped him in his tracks.

But Ringmaster didn't like using his powers on those that didn't have their own, and he definitely didn't like using them on allies. The villain would not be allowing himself any buffs in this interaction, no matter how badly Grian needed him to win.

"Don't let him touch you like that, Grian," Necromancer instructed, smiling audibly. *"Break his arm."*

Another command, and a reinforcement of the previous one. Somewhere, distantly, he registered the hero letting out a hacking cough.

His spine straightened, and suddenly, a lot more weight was going into his movements. He twisted his wrist out of Ringmaster's grip, fighting to take control again. It shouldn't have been possible. Even while off-balance without his crutch, the villain was stronger than Grian in every sense of the word. He was holding back to his own detriment.

It took one step forward for the vet to get a better angle, and for Ringmaster's legs to fail him. Grian's body roared with pain as he landed *hard* atop the other man, their clambering echoing throughout the theater. The scream that slipped out of him matched the screaming of his ribs, flaring until he was seeing stars. His body did not care to wait for relief from its anguish to resume its one and only goal.

Their new position made things arguably more difficult. Grian straddled Ringmaster, knees on either side of his torso and hands engaged in an unending attempt to force his dominant arm into an unsavory angle. The villain's brows were furrowed, eyes darting to keep up. As soon as he'd regained the breath that was knocked out of him though, he was speaking again.

"Grian — *please!* You don't want this," Ringmaster begged. "You have to keep telling yourself that! That's the trick."

The trick?

Grian grit his teeth, blinking past the black spots in his vision. His ministrations didn't stop, but his mind began to whir, trying to fill in the blanks. Ringmaster's eyes were desperate, pleading.

"Necromancer… She can't keep any of the Bamboozlers under her control for…" Ringmaster strained as Grian's full body weight leaned into a particularly rough movement. "She can't control us for more than… a few seconds! All you have to do… is think about how much you don't want to… listen to her."

For half a second, Grian's grip loosened. Then, the chains around his heart squeezed, and he was falling back into the motions.

“Pathetic,” Necromancer huffed from somewhere off to the side. “Lying to the poor man isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

The orchestrator of his sudden, unwilling violence sounded rough, hoarse. Grian hadn’t heard footsteps to indicate their approach, so he assumed they were in the same spot by the table. He could practically picture them leaning heavily against it.

After giving so many commands, she was probably too weak to do much else. Otherwise, it would have made complete sense for her to cross the room and finish Ringmaster off while the vet had him distracted. The fact that she hadn’t confirmed Grian’s suspicions about her health.

“Not lying, G,” Ringmaster said. “Kick her out of your head!”

Grian knew that. Grian knew his partner would never lie to him. Not about this. Not now. Which meant that Ringmaster was telling the truth — there existed a way for him to get the hero out of his skull. He just had to repeat how much he didn’t want her there.

It made sense. There was only one other occasion in which Necromancer had been rooting around in his brain, and it’d worn off in front of his eyes. Back when she’d tried to command him to give up Ringmaster’s name, he really, *really* hadn’t wanted to, and she’d stopped.

At the time, he thought it was part of the limit the media mistakenly thought her to have. If it wasn’t, and he’d been the one to cause their control to snap, then wasn’t that worth taking into account now? After all, he really *didn’t* want to break Ringmaster’s arm.

Necromancer must have seen the pieces clicking together in her head.

In his peripherals, Grian thought he caught sight of their hand raising, and in one jerking flick of their wrist, the command eating away at him shattered. It was similar to the last time this had occurred, something close to a weight lifting off his shoulders, which was how he knew it had been voluntarily removed.

His want to break Ringmaster's arm evaporated into thin air, and he paused, like he'd forgotten what he was trying to do. The villain, still pinned beneath him, was panting from the effort of keeping Grian at bay. There was an innate confusion in his eye, and the same sensation settled over the vet. Grian glanced up at Necromancer.

The hero had collapsed to their knees, and labored breaths wheezed from their lungs. In front of them, splattered along the stage, was a small pool of blood. Too much to be healthy, just enough to get Grian's hopes up. Necromancer was pushing herself beyond her body's limits.

Still, despite how weak she must have felt, her head was not lowered. She kept her veiled eyes on her opponents, refusing to bow or appear defeated in any capacity. There was something admirable in that, something Grian understood after enduring humiliation of his own. Unfortunately for both of them, their similarities ended there.

"Fine, if you're going to make things difficult for me," Necromancer spat. "Let's finish this a little quicker, shall we?"

Grian saw it at the same moment she did.

A metallic blade buried in the wood of the stage, just within arm's reach.

"You want to pick up that knife, Grian," the hero said. *"And you want to*

drive it into Ringmaster as painfully as possible."

Grian's hands twitched. His eyes went wide.

"You do not want to be gentle, or spare him any grief," Necromancer thundered, putting every last breath into their damning command. *"You want his blood on your hands."*

Something within Grian squeezed. A new command added to the countless others, confining his heart and shaping his desires.

Oh *God.*

His hand jerked forward, pulled by the invisible string binding his limbs. Ringmaster saw where he was going and lurched forward, attempting to grab the vet's arm. He was pinned, though, in far too awkward of a position to reach. Nothing and no one was able to stop Grian's fingers from curling around the hilt and yanking it out of the wood.

The second he straightened and his eyes shifted down to the man underneath him, Ringmaster was grabbing his wrists. *"Grian,"* the villain urged. "Remember what I said."

His eyes were wide, wild with unmistakable fear. Still, he was painfully being *gentle.* The grip on Grian's broken arm was looser, enough to only send a few thrums of hot agony through the vet's body. Ringmaster didn't spare the knife a single glance, keeping all of his attention on Grian. He was begging silently, begging that his advice had hit home.

“Do it,” Necromancer croaked. *“Find his weak spots. Drive the knife into him.”*

His weak spots.

Grian knew quite a bit about those.

He knew one of Ringmaster’s legs was weaker than the other. He knew that Ringmaster was right-handed, and far less coordinated with his left. He knew there was a patch of sensitive, scarred skin on Ringmaster’s side where an arrow had once been buried.

He knew that, even if his life was in mortal peril, Ringmaster would never hurt him. He knew that Ringmaster valued his friends above all else. He knew that Ringmaster wouldn’t be able to get out of this alive unless Grian did something.

The strings puppetting him forced him to lean his whole body weight once again into a downward movement. Ringmaster grunted, his hands beginning to shake from the sheer effort of keeping Grian away without truly using force. It wasn’t sustainable.

Sooner or later, he was going to falter, and everything would end.

Sooner or later, Grian would follow Necromancer’s orders.

Sooner or later, Grian was going to kill the man he loved.

He was going to kill *Scar*.

“No,” Grian whispered, voice raw and barely audible. *“Please,* no.”

He didn’t *want* to hurt Scar. More than *anything,* he didn’t want to hurt Scar. He didn’t want to drive this knife into him, didn’t want to listen to the voices in his head, didn’t want to be controlled, didn’t want to be bound by an enchantment.

Necromancer wailed, voice strained and coarse, *“Get… him!”*

Grian wanted to be free. He wanted to leave. He wanted to drop the knife, take his partner by the hand, and go home. He wanted safety, tranquility. He wanted to never think of this place again. He wanted Necromancer *out of his head.*

Somewhere off to the side, Necromancer hissed. Ringmaster's eyes widened. Grian didn't notice any of this. His vision blurred with tears, which fell upon the man beneath him. His face scrunched up, hands trembling around the blade.

He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't want this. He didn't *want this.*

The knife slipped out of his hands and clattered against the stage.

Necromancer let out one, final choked-out gasp, and collapsed.

Oxygen rushed to fill Grian's lungs, and he straightened. The weight of the world left him, evaporating in a single, deep breath. His mouth fell open, shock surging forward. He stopped pressing against Ringmaster, and felt zero opposition from within himself.

Grian paused to take everything in.

His heart pounded against his ribs, free from its chains. The voice in his head went quiet. No trace of any enchantments remained.

"Grian?" Ringmaster stared up at him, hesitant but hopeful. His grip on the vet's wrists loosened. "Are you–?"

He was.

He was free.

Grian was *free.*

The vet turned so quickly that his rib sent a flare of pain up his spine, but it was shoved aside. His gaze landed on the hero — the source of his despair. Grian expected to be pinned by her glare, to hear their ragged breaths, to immediately be struck by a wave of new commands after the last had been released.

Instead, he saw a heap of black fabric convulsing on the ground.

Necromancer twitched, spasmed, gagged. The noises reached Grian's ears, and he was ripping himself away from Ringmaster in an instant. Every part of his body ached, but he scrambled to cover the short distance between them and throw himself down beside the hero. He didn't know what he intended to do once he got there, just that he could not remain static.

Yet, the moment he was close enough to process their situation, Grian stopped.

Her veil had fallen to the side when she had toppled, leaving their unmasked face out in the open. It wasn't the sight of their true identity that made Grian freeze, though.

Rather, it was the thick, scarlet blood that bubbled out of her mouth and onto the ground beside her head. The scent of iron was pungent in the air surrounding them. The hero's skin was pale, eyes rolled back in their head.

Without any further warning, Necromancer's writhing ceased.

She twitched once, and then did not move again.

No rising and falling of her chest. No blinking of their eyes. No jerking or spasming. Just total, all-encompassing stillness.

Grian reached over and pressed two fingers against the pulse point in their neck.

He found absolutely nothing.

The vet didn't need any further confirmation. He already knew the truth. He knew he hadn't been released. He knew there was too much blood pooling around her. He knew what such intense spasming meant for the hero.

"They're dead," Grian declared. His tone was cold and factual as he delivered the information, like it was normal. Like there wasn't a corpse beside him. Like he hadn't just witnessed someone's final moments. Slowly, as if to give himself the chance to truly take it in, he repeated, "They're *dead."*

The words did not feel any different upon his tongue a second time. His tone did not change. His pulse did not spike. His mood did not dampen. His eyes did not wet.

Grian did not feel anything, except maybe, in the back of his mind, some amount of relief.

He tore his gaze away from the fresh corpse to gaze at his partner. Ringmaster had barely managed to get to his feet, crutch restored to its proper place. His gaze flickered towards Necromancer, then up to the vet again. The room was far too quiet.

"I think… I think she used too much of her power," Grian said, before he'd even noticed his mouth moving. "When I forced her out of my head, it must have been too much."

The explanation was odd upon his own ears — stated with a clinical detachment he'd fallen into like second nature. A person had just died in front of him. A *hero* had just died in front of him. By all means, his reaction should have been a hundred times more dramatic. It shouldn't have been at all similar to delivering bad news to a pet owner, or telling his techs to quit their attempts at revitalizing a lost soul. It should have been terrifying, new, raw, *human.*

But at the same time as a person had died in front of him, so too had one of his tormentors.

Someone who had manipulated his actions, and attempted to make him kill the man he loved with his own two hands.

What was the more human reaction, then, under those circumstances? Joy, or terror?

Neither, Grian had decided, was fully worth his time.

He let his mood plateau into a numb emptiness.

He did not feel the least bit guilty.

Ringmaster's brows furrowed. For several seconds, he said nothing. He simply watched the vet with a careful contemplation, like he was debating the correct reaction. On one hand, Necromancer was an enemy, a force trying to destroy all that they held dear. On the other, Grian had been condemning death since their very first meeting.

His concern wasn't necessary, though. If there came a time when the vet might internalize this moment, might look back and well with emotions, then it wouldn't be for a while yet. Grian already knew he was never really going to escape the effects of this place. Necromancer's death had not changed anything.

He was, if anything, frustrated it had not happened sooner.

The vet managed a heavy, half-smile up at his partner, who had softened into a civilian again in his eyes.

"Take me home, Scar," Grian said. "Please."

Scar studied him for a bit. Then, he nodded. No arguments, no questioning the vet's health, no wasting time on conversation. He simply agreed, and stepped over to help Grian to his feet.

Both of them were unsteady. Both of them were hurt. Still, they found that if Grian leaned just so against Scar's side, then neither of their injuries collided, and they could act as mutual support.

Neither dared to look at Necromancer's fallen form as they stumbled to the curtains, and out into the auditorium. The stairs down were steep, but manageable with two, and the long walk up the aisle was silent. Grian's legs ached from that alone. It was the most he'd moved

free of restraints since being captured.

They made it to the doors, but before either could approach, they were swinging open. Immediately, Grian's defenses rose, and his heart jumped into his throat. He expected to see Blackhole or Daybreak back for another round, or maybe Morphling and Terra finally arriving on scene.

Instead, his eyes landed on pink hair and lanky limbs.

Lizzie and Jimmy.

Grian sucked in a breath. His mind struggled to catch up to his mouth, but he managed to gasp, "Guys–!"

Then, he was promptly yanked in by two sets of arms. Lizzie grabbed him around the middle and Jimmy draped himself over Grian's shoulders, stroking his hair dramatically. *"Grian,"* the latter cried. "I was so worried when Blackhole teleported with you! I'm so glad you're okay!"

The vet let out a choked groan as his ribs screamed in response. He heard Scar inhale, and then the weight was off him. The throbbing continued at a steady pace, but Lizzie and Jimmy had been pulled back by the collars of their shirts.

"He *won't* be if you two continue to manhandle him like that," Scar hissed. "Hugs can wait until we're somewhere safe, anyway."

While Scar reprimanded his teammates, Grian took the opportunity to fall into old habits. He scanned them for injuries, blood, bruises,

breaks. There wasn't much he could do, even if he did spot something, but around these three, his work mode felt like a second skin.

The cut on Jimmy's forehead from Daybreak had stopped bleeding into his eyes, but its dried remnants left a nasty scene in their wake. His hair was a mess and caked with crimson — not at all a pretty sight. Still, his eyes were bright and he seemed otherwise unharmed.

Eclipse's movements seemed to favor her right side, as if she'd been hurt somewhere over there. A brief overview had Grian's gaze landing on her waist, where he could just barely see some torn clothing. Likely, she'd turned and received a slash to the back for her troubles. It brought back rotten memories, but if they were careful, this one wouldn't get infected like the last.

"Say it," Scar huffed, releasing his two sheepish friends. "Apologize."

"Sorry, Grian," Jimmy and Lizzie both muttered. Grian couldn't help but smile.

Through the doors, there came a crash, and Scar winced. He tipped backwards to peer down the hall and his expression grew dark. "Ah, we really do need to go. The fire's spreading."

Neither of the other Bamboozlers seemed surprised by this statement. Supposing he was out of the loop, Grian blinked. "Fire?"

Then, the smell of smoke infiltrated his senses. It wasn't too thick, but it was identifiable. He'd caught it when Daybreak had burst in for a brief moment as well. Getting stuck in that mess would not be ideal.

“It’s mostly in the lobby for the time being, since that’s where the bomb was aimed,” Lizzie reported. At the mention of an explosive, Grian’s brows raised. She cut him off with further elaboration before he could fret over their sanity, “A strategic move, don’t worry. The lobby’s where they hid the main entrance to the safehouse. Forced them to flee from the side halls and split up if they wanted to get out.”

Scar nodded, reclaiming his place at Grian’s side. Slowly, they started their trek out of the room. Lizzie and Jimmy went first, their respective weapons poised despite their casual tone as they chattered. They surveyed the halls, and nodded when it was safe for the weaker two to follow.

This building was large, with wide halls and large windows. Grian was able to see the night sky through them, and the expanse of a parking lot. The air was littered with thousands of falling flakes, gathering upon the pavement in a thin blanket.

“These guys are really only an issue when they’re all together,” Jimmy chimed in. He directed them in the opposite direction to the lobby. “There’s a bloody lot of them.”

Grian coughed out a small laugh.

“Trust me,” he replied, a bitter humor to his tone. “I am well acquainted with every single one of them after this experience.”

His comment was in bad taste. He should have known better. Beside him, Scar tensed, and both Lizzie and Jimmy’s steps stuttered. It was suddenly far too quiet.

“This never should have happened,” Scar sighed — a long, drawn out noise, which tapered out into a frustrated groan. A profound guilt

clouded his partner's green eyes. "We tried to keep you away from this side of things… and we failed."

Grian's heart squeezed. He leaned over and pressed his lips against the side of Scar's mask. "You're here now. That's more than enough for me. Let's just get out of here."

The tension didn't ease, but the other man did seem to unwind the slightest bit.

They resumed their regular pace, searching for an emergency exit further from the destruction. While Jimmy stayed at the front of the group, Lizzie hung back, falling into step beside the vet. Her gaze didn't settle anywhere, jumping from place to place, and her grip on her spear was tight.

As casually as she could while looking supremely suspicious, Lizzie cleared her throat and asked, "So, you said you've been… acquainted with… *all* of the Gs, right?"

Grian bit his tongue to keep his expression from shifting into something sour. He already knew where she was trying to go with this line of questioning. That conversation with Terra had been playing on repeat in his mind since he learned the truth. The Bamboozlers — Lizzie, specifically — having a complicated history with a villain-turned-hero was not easy to forget.

"Yes," Grian said, an answer to her inquiry both out loud and subtextually. "I've learned… quite a lot recently."

Her shoulders dropped, though not with any amount of relief. The shadows of past memories seemed to flit over her eyes, dark as the sky above. "Right. I should apologize."

It was an apology holding more weight than what its simple word choice might imply. She was apologizing for Terra, for not telling Grian sooner, for letting it happen to him, too. Lizzie always was one for hidden messaging, and after knowing her for so many months, the vet had grown accustomed to it.

He couldn't imagine how it felt for her, and the other two Bamboozlers as well. Grian had been the person getting tortured, but some amount of that bled into the three he'd left behind. It had to be haunting to have another friend kidnapped off the street by the very same group that had stolen someone from them years prior.

"No need," Grian countered, reaching over to lightly punch her shoulder. She jolted, as if not having expected the contact. "Really, Liz, it's alright."

And he found that it wasn't a lie. Not completely. Things weren't perfect, but he wasn't Terra. He'd seen that look in the hero's eyes — that broken, desperate, wanting look. He was the picture of what Grian might have become had his torment gone on a single moment later.

But it hadn't. The Bamboozlers hadn't let it, and they never would. He trusted them not to let him spiral that far, or slip from their grasps long enough to be lost. Maybe everything wasn't perfect, but they were *alright.* As long as they got out of this alive, there was a chance to rebuild and they could be *alright.*

Lizzie studied him for a long moment, scouring him for an ounce of false confidence. Grian was laid bare before her, limping and bruised and beaten half to death, but truthful all the same. She saw that, and nodded.

“Here it is!”

Jimmy broke them out of their shared understanding to point out a stairwell, marked as an emergency exit. Due to the tapering out of the windows in this area, there wasn’t a way to tell where exactly it would lead them, but anywhere was better than remaining inside a burning building.

Still, for safety, Lizzie and Jimmy exited first. They pushed it open slowly, checking for traps, tripwires, hidden explosives, and when it was clear, proceeded through the threshold. Peering past them revealed more of the same parking lot, which seemed to surround the building on all sides. Thankfully, the wide open space made their job of scoping things out a lot easier. A second later, the two villains gestured for Grian and Scar to proceed.

The vet’s first taste of freedom since his failed escape attempt was cold. Chilled wind nipped at exposed skin, reminding him of the coat the Gs had confiscated with the rest of his belongings after his kidnapping. It’d likely been burned, or something similar, in case of a tracker.

That item, at least, he had no sentimental attachment to. He missed it in the open air, but he could stay strong until they got somewhere safe. Scar was a pleasantly warm body next to him, anyway.

God, he’d missed the sweet sensation of gentle contact. Grian fixated on their points of contact now almost more than he did when they were still dancing around their feelings. It was a dangerous half-obsession. He was liable to get addicted at this rate. Scar wouldn’t complain if he did, though.

“I didn’t think about bringing an extra coat,” Scar said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Grian replied. “It would’ve slowed you down anyway.”

“You all stay here for a minute,” Lizzie instructed, retrieving her grappling hook from her belt. “I’m going to double check our escape route from the roof. I’ll let you know if the coast’s clear.”

The other two Bamboozlers nodded, and she was off in a blur of pink. Instinctively, Scar and Jimmy both switched to scanning the horizon, perpetually alert for any sort of movement. They were so stoic, so serious, so devoid of their usual banter and humor.

“This is so weird,” Grian heard himself mutter, earning both Jimmy and Scar’s attention. He managed a weak smile. “Seeing you guys in work mode, I mean. It’s been so long since you’ve had to be professional in front of me.”

Scar’s eyes crinkled. “Can never be too careful. Promise we’ll relax soon.”

They faded back to silence, but the vet was only able to linger in that state of being for a short while. He was uneasy, and far too cold. The distraction of a conversation was the only way he could really ignore the shivers traveling down his spine.

“Your plan,” he started again. “It’s really impressive. Felt like you knew this building the way you knew that bank. Have you guys been here before, or did you have a blueprint?”

“Hm? Oh, no,” Jimmy snorted. “There’s no blueprints or visiting hours on an Agency safehouse, mate, abandoned or not.”

“An abandoned Agency safehouse,” Grian echoed under his breath. The words puffed out in a little cloud before him. They made sense, lined up with the rest of the information he’d gathered. “Right… Well, that’s cooler then, I think. You went in blind.”

Scar chuckled, “Technically not. We’d never go in *totally* blind.”

Distantly, Lizzie’s footsteps could be heard from the roof. Part of it must have been made of metal for the noise to be reaching them. Grian wasn’t surprised she hadn’t returned yet — the building was huge. If she wanted to see the other side of the parking lot, she’d have to cross the entire roof.

“The Agency’s pretty strict,” Jimmy elaborated. “They like their buildings all structured kinda similarly. You just need to break into one of them — the rest will always be at least a *little* similar. And trust me, I’ve done a *lot* of breaking into their HQ in my time.”

Grian raised a brow at the way his friend’s chest puffed up. He was quite proud of his scheming. The vet would allow him to boast a bit, considering how much he owed Jimmy already. “I guess that’s why you were able to figure out where the heroes were staying and isolate them.”

“Yeah, just about,” came Lizzie’s voice, startling the three as she landed directly beside Grian. None of them expected her to return so quickly. “The coast’s clear, but I wouldn’t put your weapons away yet. It’s eerily quiet.”

Nodding, Scar leaned on his crutch and began the process of migrating out into the parking lot. It was a great, empty distance to the nearest line of buildings. There would be no cover until that point, save for

the scattering of young trees that sat between some unoccupied parking spaces. Thankfully, as if sensing their plight, the wind lulled and came to a stop. They were spared the added cold for a bit longer.

"It was my idea, by the way," Lizzie chimed, spinning her spear in her left hand as she stayed next to Grian. Her eyes, just like that of Scar and Jimmy, never lingered in one place for too long. All three of them were accustomed to keeping their guards raised. "Trapping the heroes in their rooms, I mean."

"Why do *you* sound so chipper?" Jimmy shot her a playful glare. "It wasn't a massively successful plan. On our end, at least. Daybreak and Blackhole were already on their way to the infirmary when I got into the building, and Necromancer got away from you."

"Yeah, I guess," Lizzie relented. She let out a heavy sigh, the loudest sound in the clearing aside from the rustling of branches. "Only Scar had any luck."

Beside the vet, Scar's shoulders rose. Grian glanced over at him, just in time to see his expression overcome with confusion. "What do you mean? I didn't have any luck at all."

Lizzie stopped spinning her spear.

"Huh?" Her brows furrowed. Slowly, she replied, "Scar, you were the one that trapped Morphling and Terra. Those hero quarters were in your section of the building. Isn't that why we were able to get Grian without encountering them once?"

Scar's steps, without warning, halted. The other three were forced to pause alongside him. Grian swallowed, acutely aware of how exposed their current location left them.

“No,” Scar started slowly. “The rooms in my section were *empty* when I got to them.”

Lizzie and Jimmy froze, their eyes blown wide. A pit opened in Grian’s stomach. His gaze shifted to something past the Bamboozlers to a movement none of them had bothered to notice before — the branches bending in the wind.

Bending in the wind.

But the air was entirely still.

“Go,” Grian whispered. Then, louder, he shouted, “Go! *Run!”*

The Bamboozlers did not need further instruction. Immediately, they restarted their pace, with Scar leaning harder against Grian in an attempt to move faster. None of them could fully run, but their walk sped up, aiming for the line of buildings in the distance. There were still at least four rows of trees planted between them and their freedom. If they could just get past those, they had a shot.

Things were never quite that easy, though.

Beneath them, the ground began to rumble. Their steps became unsteady as all three struggled to stay upright while retaining their pace. A moment later, the parking lot ahead of them suddenly burst open, concrete and rubble flying into the air. Scar skidded to a stop to shield Grian, and the other two Bamboozlers threw their arms over their heads.

When they straightened, the dust had cleared to reveal the trees' roots writhing above the earth. Lightning quick, they started to interlock with each other, looping and pulling until they had formed a barricade of solid wood. It wasn't a wide wall, but it was enough to force them to take a detour, and anything would slow them down.

"No," Lizzie cursed. "Damn him!"

Unfortunately, a single wall was not where the surprises ended.

Jimmy was gasping and yanking all three of them to the side as the concrete right underneath them started to crack. They dove out of the way just in time for yet another barrage of roots to fly into the air. Grian coughed as a cloud of debris flew with them.

The vet could only gape up at the second wall of plants as it formed before his very eyes. Somewhere behind him, and off to his side, more booming erupted from the earth, all undoubtedly caused by the same thing. A second longer of hesitation, and they'd be trapped.

Thankfully, Lizzie wasn't as paralyzed as the rest of them. She growled and slashed her spear at the nearest looping roots, cutting them clean in half. For only a moment, there was a gap in the newly-created barricade. However, before it had a chance to do them any good, the roots were sprouting anew and taking the place of their fallen foliage.

"No, no, no," Lizzie chanted, cutting again and again. It was no use. "Come *on!"*

"Oh." Scar's voice, suddenly dripping with venom, stole Grian's attention. He turned, and his eyes widened. "It's *you."*

Three walls surrounded them on all sides, leaving the group cornered in some fabricated dead end with only one possible clear route out. And standing at the end of that singular path was a smiling figure they all recognized.

Terra did not speak as he watched them. His yellow eye was aflame with unreadable emotions. Despite the upward tilt to his lips, he conveyed no sense of actual happiness, only empty nothingness. The hero stood with such unfaltering stillness that he almost seemed more akin to a statue than a person.

He took one step closer, the scuff of his boot causing the earth to shake.

Bile rose in Grian's throat, and his gut twisted. The uncontrollable urge to run shot through him, but his feet were glued to the ground. Winter itself took over his veins, icy and *wrong*.

But Terra wasn't given a chance to progress any further.

In one large stride, Lizzie covered half the distance between them and blocked the hero's view of her friends. Terra paused, his eye widening almost imperceptibly and his smile falling.

She raised her spear, the tip shining in the moonlight as it aimed directly for the other's neck. The action seemed to surprise him. Terra rocked back on his heels, drawing in an audible breath. There was a tense, quiet moment in which no one moved, and no one spoke.

When Lizzie finally broke that stillness, her comment was not meant for their opponent at all. Her voice carried over her shoulder instead, directed towards her team. "Use your grappling hooks."

Grian heard Jimmy jolt to pull it from his belt. The *click-whoosh* of it firing and the *clink* of it landing came a second later. The vet glanced briefly over, heart thumping at the sight of the hook attached safely at the top. Jimmy made a noise of affirmation, confirming it would hold.

Terra broke from his trance then, tipping his chin up. That was all the motion it took for his wall to shift in turn. With a sickening crack, a handful of roots snapped themselves free of their knots and darted for the hook. They wrapped around its wire, tugging with a sudden and extreme force.

Jimmy gasped as the grappling hook was yanked out of his hands and practically consumed by the endless plants. Before they could even really form, their hopes of escaping over the top of the barricade were stifled.

“Yeah, I’m not letting that one slide,” Terra hummed, voice echoing and amplifying until it seemed to surround them on all sides. “Sorry, man.”

Jimmy glared, rolling his shoulder. “And what do *you* want, eh? What’s this nonsense for?”

“This?” The hero raised a brow, looking around like he was only just noticing his homemade prison. He crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. “Nothing special. It’s only here to make things easier.”

“No need for dramatics,” Scar chimed in, leaning into the deepened lilt of his modulator. “You want a fight? You’ve got one.”

Terra’s lips dropped into a line, something akin to a scowl washing

over him. He took a step back, and Lizzie, in turn, took one forward. Still, she did not speak. Every second that went by without her usual energy dropped the temperature by another ten degrees.

The hero hesitated, eyeing the spear of his former friend. After a moment, he sighed, “Well, if we have to, I guess it can’t be helped.”

His fingers snapped, the sound ricocheting off the walls, and then immediately being overshadowed by the rumbling of the ground restarting. The Bamboozlers whirled around, trying to locate the source of the sound.

A portion of the nearest barricade cracked and shot out, aiming straight for Jimmy. He was just barely able to dodge out of the way. An offshoot branch did, however, scrape across his arm as it went. He grunted, the red fabric of his sleeve shredding and the scarlet of his own blood rushing to fill the gap.

Lizzie inhaled sharply, abandoning Terra to start towards her teammate, but another burst of plant growth cut her off. She was nimble as ever, thankfully, and able to throw herself backwards before she could be struck.

More branches off from the walls, expanding outwards like an endless plague of nature faster than any of them could truly process. Until eventually, it was difficult to see the other two Bamboozlers through the rapidly thickening array of branches.

It took far too long for any of them to realize what was happening. Grian’s adrenaline spiked so immediately that dizziness flooded his brain.

They were being *separated.*

“No, no, no,” Scar shouted. He lurched forward, as if planning on running through the plants, but Grian was quick to tug him back. “No–!”

He thrashed for just a bit, but ceased after Grian hissed, “Stop, you’ll hurt yourself.”

They watched the walls knot together completely, cutting them off from their friends. Soon enough, they’d been surrounded on every side by plant walls, high enough to blot out the street lights and cast them in darkness.

“That damn hero,” Scar whispered, a horrified awe to his voice. His eyes shifted down to look at Grian. “This is *bad.”*

Grian took a deep breath. He squeezed his partner’s hand and nodded. There was no point in denying what was so clear, even as the realization settling upon him was heavy. Nothing good could come of being forced apart. Not when they were all tired, and sporting various injuries.

At the very least, the raised walls kept the worst of the cold out.

“I’m only making things fair,” came Terra’s voice, rising from a point that Grian could no longer see through the newly-formed obstacles. “If you want a fight, come find me. I’ll wait right here.”

Another rumbling echoed, and ahead of them one of the walls began to shrivel and part. Beyond, a twisting maze of split paths and forks in the road could be seen, constructed solely of the trees that had once only innocently occupied the lot.

Distantly, somewhere down those winding, overgrown roads, Terra's laugh echoed. It beckoned them to follow, go blindly searching, lose themselves in the maze laid out before them.

"Boogeyman?" Scar tossed his voice over the walls. Grian watched his partner, fear clawing up his throat. "Eclipse?"

"I can hear you," came Jimmy's response. His voice was quiet, muffled, but audible.

Lizzie sounded strained when they heard from her, like she was physically exerting herself. "Damn it. I can't climb if they keep moving!"

"Don't try anything risky," Scar shouted back. "We should just… go along with it for now. Twisting your ankle doing stupid stuff is only going to go badly."

"Ugh," Lizzie shrieked. Grian jumped as the wall to his right suddenly split down the middle. He saw her pink hair and the point of her spear. Instantly, the roots shot out to reconnect themselves, but she had already achieved what she wanted. Through the briefly-created hole, she threw a small, circular object. "Here! You'll need this more than I will."

Scar caught it, and the vet recoiled at the sight of a grenade.

Lizzie had tossed them an *explosive.*

“What?” Grian blinked at her through the roots. He saw steeled blue eyes, and then the wall fully separated them again. Still, he yelled, “How the hell could *we* use this more than *you?”*

His partner tugged on his sleeve. “She’s right,” Scar said, hooking the grenade onto his belt. “Out of all of us, she is in the least danger.”

The vet frowned. “Why would she–?”

Grian didn’t need to finish his own thought.

Terra’s former friend, the person that broke him out of prison years prior, the villain whose name he hadn’t given up, even in the throes of torture — Grian had seen how Terra had backed off when Lizzie was in front of them. No matter how uncaring the hero had allowed himself to seem when he was one on one with the vet, he still had some softness left in him.

“Thank you,” Scar called over the wall. “Find us as soon as you can. Boogeyman?”

“Yep, right here,” came Jimmy’s voice from the opposite side. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll stay invisible. You two stay safe.”

“We’ll do our best,” Scar promised. He turned to Grian, eyes worried. “Can you handle a bit more of this?”

The vet swallowed. “Just… don’t leave my side, okay?”

Scar shot him a winning smile in the form of arcing laughter lines, honest and warm despite their situation. “Never again. Not if I can help it.”

Together, they started down the only path available to them. It wasn’t a comfortable journey, by any means. Their bodies ached, and the freezing temperatures only added to it. Every sensation was doubled by the pins and needles brought on by the cold. When they came to their first fork in the road, they abided by the usual rule of keeping a hand on one wall and following that.

Around the bend, they found only more of that irritating maze. Scar was, at least, doing a little bit better. Now that he wasn’t in active combat, he seemed to be regaining some of his energy. His steps were quicker, and he wasn’t leaning quite as much on his crutch.

Grian wished he could’ve said the same for himself. At that point, the morphine had long-since left his system. He was lethargic, shivering, hungry, and weak. No matter how nicely the Gs had treated him during his last few hours in captivity, it didn’t compare to the days of malnutrition before it. Scar supported his weight as best he could, but it was difficult when every part of the vet was hurting in some way.

Luckily, or unluckily, they only had to venture on for about five more minutes before the maze came to a dead end in front of them. Scar was about to turn them around, accepting they’d chosen the wrong path, when the branches in front of them suddenly shriveled. The two watched, breaths hitched, as a new route opened to them.

They were not, however, the only people in this part of the maze.

Grian shrieked as his partner shoved him to the side. The buzz of a crackling staff split the space where he’d been standing. Had he not been pushed, an electric pulse would have connected directly with his

chest, sending a current straight to his heart.

In a millisecond, Scar was moving like Ringmaster again. He grabbed hold of Morphling's staff, and yanked with everything he had. The hero was forced through the new doorway, getting an elbow to the face before he could so much as gasp in surprise.

He stumbled back, releasing his staff and clutching at his nose. It was crooked when his hand fell away, broken if the blood was any indication. Red gushed down his face and stained the front of his suit. Morphling was not given a chance to recover from the strike, as the villain immediately whirled on him and attempted to use his electricity against him.

However, before the weapon could make contact, the hero was overtaken by a bright, blue light. It burned his eyes, forcing him to squint. Grian had only seen it one other time, in a park months ago. When something emerged from the flash, it was not human, exactly like he'd last witnessed.

This time though, Morphling did not take the form of a dove. A shape — low to the ground and thin enough to be a difficult target — darted forward, and Ringmaster cursed. A snake wound its way around the villain's leg.

Grian watched it raise its head and open its mouth, revealing pointed fangs. While he was no reptile specialist, he doubted someone as aggressive as Morphling would've chosen to transform into a nonvenomous species. A bite from the right type of snake could have a person writhing on the ground in a matter of seconds.

Ringmaster tripped over himself, back hitting the wall. He swung the staff around, like he was going to try and shock the creature. Unfortunately, with Morphling gripping onto him so tightly, that

would likely reverberate through him as well. There was very little he could do to shake the hero off without subsequent personal damage.

Grian sucked in a breath, eyes landing on the hero. Morphling had been the main face of his nightmare for ages. He was a ruthless fighter, willing to resort to cruel means to get what he wanted, and the type to smile the whole way through. The vet was scared to death of him.

But right at that moment, this wasn't Morphling. This was an *animal.*

He dealt with animals all the time.

Without a second thought, Grian pushed off the wall, letting himself move on instinct. The snake gnashed its teeth at Ringmaster, and while its head was extended further from its body, the vet wrapped a hand around its throat. A shocked hiss left the creature, but it could do nothing to stop Grian from carefully beginning to unwind its body from the villain's leg with his broken arm.

His years of experience handling pets cringed at the rough way he kept hold of the creature. There were tools and specialists for this sort of thing. It was neither humane, nor entirely safe, but so long as those fangs weren't burying themselves in him or Ringmaster, little else mattered.

Any and all guilt left Grian the second the blue light returned. He felt the shift within his hands, and suddenly, he no longer held a thin, scaled throat in his hands. Instead, his grip was bunched in the sparkling fabric of Morphling's cloak.

The hero did not let that remain for long. He spun, using the blindness ultimately caused by his transformation to his advantage, and kicked

Grian square in the chest. The vet fell back, lungs heaving against the reignited fire in his ribs. An involuntary cry left him, meek and shallow.

He forced himself to scramble until he was propped against the wall, a sufficient amount of distance between himself and the other two. The debris of the cracked pavement and the biting layer of snow upon the ground ate at his exposed skin, adding to the millions of little injuries he already sported. Grian couldn't care about that, though. His eyes remained trained solely on his opponent, and his mind spun with every possible form of retaliation that might be coming his way.

Thankfully, he was not alone. To keep Morphling from actually pursuing the Grian, Ringmaster instantly reengaged him. Since one hand was gripping onto his crutch, he had no choice but to utilize the staff, blocking a punch with its handle and thrusting forward when he could. It wasn't his preferred method of fighting, but tossing it aside wasn't an option, and handing it over wasn't either.

The villain was not used to this weapon, though, whereas the hero was, of course, more than familiar. Because of this, Morphling was able to easily maneuver around the other's sloppy form, gaining the upper hand in their scrap without breaking a sweat.

It was hardly surprising when the hero finally decided to grab his staff and sweep Ringmaster's feet out from underneath him. He caught the crutch as well in his movement, so the villain was unable to recover fully. Ringmaster went down hard and fast. His back slammed against concrete, the breath punching from his lungs.

The process of getting up with his aids was a difficult one, so he was nearly helpless, unable to do anything besides roll out of the way as Morphling's staff stabbed forward.

That small of a distance covered was almost a waste of energy with how quickly the hero redirected. Not with his staff, but the sole of his boot. It planted itself against Ringmaster's wrist, pinning him in place. As the villain reached for his knife, the electrified end of Morphling's staff threatened to plunge into his chest. Ringmaster froze, though his expression spoke of uncontained rage.

"Nuh-uh, no way," Morphling said, sounding almost disappointed. "You've used that stupid dagger more than enough. I saw what you did to Blackhole. None of that."

"Please," Ringmaster scoffed, incredulous. "I gave him the chance to run, and he didn't take it. His injuries could've been avoided if he just —!"

"I don't want to hear it," Morphling barked, voice echoing and splintering into a hundred distant versions of itself against the walls. "For years, your group has tormented this city. One act of mercy now does not make up for every misdeed that's led to this point."

His staff crackled dangerously close to Ringmaster's heart. Grian watched with bated breath, fingers digging into the rocks beneath his palms.

"I'm not *trying* to redeem myself," Ringmaster replied, voice even and fueled by malice. "I'm here to retrieve what is rightfully mine, and *you* are in my way."

Morphling's jaw clenched, and his grip on his staff shifted. That was the only warning that was given — no quips, no snide comments, no flourishing attacks. Grian didn't even have time to scream as Morphling shoved forward with his weapon.

An atmosphere of red swallowed the entire staff when it was less than an inch away.

Grian could have cried with relief.

“No!” Morphling cursed, lips pulling back in a snarl. “Damn it! You were supposed to be powerless!”

“It takes… a little longer than you think… for my power to fade,” Ringmaster replied, though his words were strained. The whole of his focus was trained solely on keeping himself alive. “I’m not as… fragile as some of you… heroes are.”

Morphling did not miss the other’s change in demeanor.

“Ah, but it seems you *have* gotten weaker.” His smile returned, and he continued to attempt to press forward, putting the whole of his weight onto his staff. “That’s fine. I’ll just wait. You’ll run out of stamina eventually.”

Ringmaster made a small, almost inaudible noise in the back of his throat at that. It sounded alarmed. Grian could guess what that meant for the state of his partner’s stamina already — depleting more by the minute. His power wouldn’t hold forever, but he also couldn’t afford to break his focus to move out of the way.

“It’s a shame. In my opinion, you deserve a much slower death,” Morphling sighed, as if his actions really were upsetting him. “Still, this is overdue. No longer will my team be forced to endure as every interview is twisted to be about *you,* or every Agency ranking is based on how often we’ve foiled *your* heists. The world will be that much more bearable once you’re gone.”

The red glow around the staff flickered.

“And judging by that,” Morphling said. “It seems like your time has almost arrived.”

An image appeared in Grian’s mind, sharp and clear and terribly close to being present.

Ringmaster, *dead.*

His arms limp in the snow, body lifeless, eyes unblinking. Electrocuted upon the cold ground, so close to freedom. The scent of ozone haunted that mental picture, permeating every inch of it.

Grian couldn’t let that happen.

His fingers squeezed upon a handful of rocks. They dug into his skin, the pain almost sharp enough to break through the numbing effect of the cold.

An idea came to him.

Ringmaster let out a sharp gasp, drawing Grian’s attention. Morphling had moved his foot off of the villain’s wrist in favor of slamming it into his gut. The red light flickered far more furiously, indicating exactly how dire the situation was about to get. Ringmaster’s focus wouldn’t remain fully on the weapon for much longer.

He was not yet entirely helpless, though. With his hand free — particularly, the one with which he held his crutch — he was attempting to lift it up, as if to use it as a blunt force object. Unfortunately, in splitting his attention between his power and his movements, he was slower than he needed to be. Morphling noticed him, and released his weapon just briefly to grab at the end of the villain's crutch.

He yanked and it tore out of Ringmaster's hands, where it was then tossed aside carelessly. It skittered across the snow, landing feet away from Grian.

Perfect.

The vet swallowed down the lump in his throat and called out, "Morphling! Hey!"

Morphling's head shot up to follow the noise with a noise of surprise, like he'd forgotten he was not alone with his opponent.

Grian would ensure he regretted that.

He let his fingers dig into the broken ground further, and pulled up a pile of dirt and pebbles. In one succinct motion, he jumped to his feet, pushing through his body's screaming, and lobbed the rubble at the hero's face.

A cloud of dust and earth struck him exactly right. Morphling hissed and stumbled back, both hands falling away from his weapon as he rubbed at his eyes. His mask had not been enough to protect him from the unexpected attack.

Still, Grian wasn't done. He dipped and picked up the fallen crutch. In two massive strides, he'd covered the distance between them, raising it over his head.

With as much force as he could physically manage, Grian brought the crutch down and struck the hero hard enough to send him careening to the ground.

Morphling cried out, limbs flailing and failing to cushion his fall in any way. The ground hit him with a fury if his choked gasp was any indication. The hero curled into a ball, arms clutching at his stomach.

Grian did not waste anymore time. He turned his eyes back to his partner, whose power was growing dimmer by the second. The vet took his hand and yanked him out from underneath the weapon. As soon as it was out of range, the red light dissipated, and the staff clattered to the ground.

Adrenaline fueled one last push from Grian. He slammed the heel of his shoe against the point of the staff until he heard a sickening *crack*. The jolts of electricity sent to his leg from the contact fizzled out nearly as soon as they made contact, too weak to do any damage, until they disappeared completely. Finally, Morphling's weapon died beneath his foot.

Both Ringmaster and Grian heaved for breath. Their eyes met, shocked green on furious brown. The vet watched as, for the first time in a long while, a soft pink blush spread across his partner's face.

"I was right," Ringmaster whispered, awestruck. "You are *so* hot when you're violent."

Despite himself, Grian smiled.

Morphling's low groan as he forced himself to sit up stole the moment from them. The hero spat blood onto the snow beside him, a glare sharp enough to kill on his face. "You *pest.*"

Grian focused on the present. A mere vet was not going to be able to take Morphling in a fight, even if he had gotten the jump on him once. This was better left in the hands of professionals, and he was not about to argue that fact. He helped Ringmaster to his feet as hastily as possible, and returned his crutch to its rightful owner.

However, in the time it took them to do that, Morphling had used the wall's various branches to claw himself into a standing position as well. The hero took a deep, wheezing breath to center himself, but winced as his chest expanded.

Grian felt a twisted pride settle upon his shoulders as he realized why.

He'd broken Morphling's rib.

He'd returned the exact damage done to him.

The grin that split the vet's face was nothing short of triumphant. A nicer person might not have celebrated, might have considered it, at most, a form of equivalent justice.

Grian kind of wanted to know what it would feel like to break every other bone in Morphling's body.

The hero must have seen that spark of ill intent inside him, as he seemed to grow even more enraged.

"And here I thought I'd picked the easy opponents," Morphling huffed, gaze sliding over to Ringmaster. "Your little vet has some bite, doesn't he?"

Pointedly, the hero did not acknowledge Grian while he spoke, as if he were not capable of understanding the sentiment. With the level of condescension in his tone, it might have even been more accurate to say he regarded him closer to a *pet* than a *person.*

A purposeful move, probably, to get subtle revenge against him for manhandling his snake form earlier. Grian bit back a scoff, finding it far too ridiculous to embrace the insult.

Out of the two of them, Ringmaster was more offended on his behalf. He stepped in front of Grian, blocking him from the hero's line of sight.

"He's a bystander. Your opponent is me," Ringmaster said. "If you had an ounce of integrity left in you, that's how it would have been this whole time."

Morphling crossed his arms, a sneer on his face. "Well, *excuse* me," he retorted. "I didn't realize you'd care quite so much about bystanders, given your history."

Grian watched Ringmaster's hand tighten on his crutch. There was a heavy silence between them, a smug look blooming on Morphling's face. It didn't take a genius to figure out why, not when it was a weakness the Gs had been exploiting all night.

Discussion of death in front of the vet was consistently something that quieted the Bamboozlers. Grian knew they had killed people before, whether it be other minor criminals trespassing in their territory, police officers attempting to stop them, or innocents caught in the crossfire. Even if they had done their best to cut those losses recently, it *was* still a part of their history.

Morphling's logic, in some twisted way, made sense. To those who did not know them personally, what made Grian different from the other lives they'd ended?

And to their credit, that was not an invalid question to ask. If the vet *had* been slightly less lucky that first day, it was entirely possible he would have been killed to preserve Ringmaster's identity.

Those were concepts Grian himself had already deconstructed in his mind. They didn't perplex him anymore.

Maybe it *was* just by pure chance that he lived through his encounters with the Bamboozlers, that he'd said all the right things, made all the right moves, and become the type of person that his partner would risk his own life to protect.

But they were past that. A thousand *maybes* wouldn't change the fact that he was standing here now, aligned with his villain instead of against him. Some blood staining Ringmaster's hands wasn't going to scare him off. Not anymore.

"Besides, he's hardly a bystander now," Morphling said, clicking his tongue in disgust. His hand unconsciously rubbed at the part of his torso that had been hit. "Unbelievable."

“You deserve a hell of a lot more,” Grian replied, ages of pent-up anger finally coming to the forefront of his mind. “I should have aimed for your head.”

The hero’s brow twitched.

“Be quiet, vet. You should have been powerless too,” Morphling growled. “It’s so annoying. Necromancer swore you were under their control, but *twice* now, you’ve gone against–”

He stopped.

Slowly, Morphling processed his own statement.

Something dawned on him, his mouth dropping open and expression shifting. Horror was ripe in his eyes.

“No,” he said, so quiet that the words were scarcely there at all. A hand raised to his heart, as if Morphling were scared it might burst from his chest. “No, you *couldn’t* have.”

“We did,” Ringmaster cut in. “She’s dead, hero.”

Morphling reeled back as if he’d been struck. An unparalleled wave of sadness, disbelief, fear, and rage ripped through his visible countenance. His entire plan, everything he’d been working towards this entire time, unraveled in an instant.

The hero bent at the waist. His heavy breaths came faster, until his

fractured rib forced a coughing fit out of him. He panted and gasped and a sob wretched its way out of his throat.

It was a pathetic display.

Ringmaster and Grian watched on in silence. Neither's heart was particularly warmed by the mourning of their enemy. Quite the opposite, actually. Though the vet could not see his partner's full expression, he could tell by the furrow of his brows that they wore matching looks of disgust.

"You," Morphling's broken, wet voice spat. His head tipped up to direct his fury at the pair. "You *killed* her."

"*You* left your teammates to deal with us all alone," Ringmaster replied, calm and cold. "Maybe, if you hadn't, she would still be alive."

"No," Morphling denied, shaking his head. More insistently, he shouted, "No! I didn't–!"

"Didn't, what? You didn't abandon your team? Didn't pick the cowardly option and leave them to die?" Ringmaster took a step forward. Grian's brows raised, entranced by how quickly his partner adjusted to the social aspect of their fight. "Didn't turn and run to Terra to think up a new plan when you saw yours was failing?"

Morphling fell silent, simply glaring at the villain as he swayed another foot closer to the hero. Judging by the slight downturn of his lips at the mention of Terra, that was exactly what he'd done.

“Be honest,” Ringmaster scolded, raising a finger to point at his opponent. “You know our nature. Just a second ago, you brought up the fact that we’ve never cared about casualties before. And yet, while fully aware of this, you left your team alone without reinforcements and expected everything to be fine?”

An irrefutable point.

Not a single thing could be said in protest of it.

He had left his team to die. He had, in some ways, caused Blackhole’s injuries and Necromancer’s end. He had secretly conspired with Terra on this secondary plan, and he had paid the price.

Finally, the hero slowly straightened to his full height.

The vague visibility created by the street lights illuminated his grief-stricken features. He was a mess. Morphling’s mouth pulled into a thin line, grim and past the point of revealing anything. Tear tracks streaked down his face as clearly as the blood from his broken nose. His hair was windswept and tangled.

Grian saw the same resolve burning in his eyes that Blackhole had sported earlier. Like a cornered animal on the brink of death, he was gearing up to lash out.

Morphling was beginning to realize that his plan wasn’t going to work. Should he succeed in killing them here, it would not bring back the teammate he’d lost. That didn’t matter, though.

When the hero changed his stance, readying himself for a fight, it was

clear to Grian that his goals had changed. No personal goals blinded Morphling any longer. Now, he intended to end them in Necromancer's name instead of his own.

If he was going to make such a change, then Grian would not let history repeat itself. He too needed to change.

The vet reached out and grabbed Ringmaster's hand. His villain looked over his shoulder at him, confused.

"Don't hold back," Grian said. His heart sped up, but he meant every word. "Do whatever you have to do to finish this."

Ringmaster sucked in a breath, eyes growing wide. He searched the vet's face, scanning for a single flicker of hesitation or fear, but he wouldn't find anything. Grian was sure about this decision — had been for a while.

"Oh," Ringmaster whispered. Gingerly, he nodded, and gave Grian's hand a squeeze. "Alright. Anything for you, Doctor."

Then, like second nature, he was charging towards the hero. A red glow had already consumed his fist by the time Morphling raised his arms to block, and he was thrown against the wall in a violent crash.

Unfortunately, he did not hesitate to utilize his powers again. Right as Ringmaster was about to land another blow, the flash of blue surrounded him, and a little mouse darted between the villain's legs. The second he was behind Ringmaster, he transformed back. When Grian was able to blink the black spots out of his vision, he saw that Morphling had Ringmaster in a chokehold.

His partner wasn't panicking though. He struggled and pulled at the arm, but while Morphling was focused, dipped his hand into his sheath. His blade gave a subtle *shing,* covered up by Ringmaster's accentuated gagging. Not a moment later, it was jammed into the hero's upper thigh.

Morphling cried out, releasing Ringmaster. The villain wasn't quite done though. He twisted the handle of the knife and pulled it back out, then spun on his heel to kick his opponent to the ground.

It was not, however, a human body that landed on the pavement. The main difference Grian noticed about this particular flash of light was that it was much larger than the others.

Judging by Ringmaster's wide eyes and stuttering pace, he seemed to know what that meant. "Grian, move!"

The vet did not need to be told twice. He moved as fast as he could manage further down the maze corridor. Preferably, he aimed to get to a more open area, devoid of dead ends. Ringmaster followed him, until the villain seemed to deem them a safe distance away and doubled back to prepare to counter whatever it was.

A low, animalistic snarl rose from the dissipating cloud of light.

Grian's eyes widened as a massive wolf stepped into view. Morphling had emerged with huge claws, snarling fangs, and a hunched form, ready to pounce. Larger than almost every dog he'd ever treated, and far, far meaner.

"Oh, good," Ringmaster sighed, sounding *relieved,* for some reason. He tossed Grian a look that was tinged with an almost manic satisfaction. "I was worried he'd turn into a bear. A wolf means he's getting tired."

Grian gawked. “This is a *good* thing?”

The wolf stalked closer, growling in the back of its throat, ears pinned to the top of its head. Every ounce of its body language was threatening, despite the way the bleeding puncture wound on its front leg caused him to limp.

“Definitely. Although, unrelated question,” his partner hummed, taking on a tone that did not inspire confidence. “I don’t suppose you know any special vet skills to keep wolves from mauling you to death once they’re on top of you?”

The way he phrased it meant it took a minute for the vet to realize it was a genuine ask. Grian nearly scoffed. “Absolutely not. Are you kidding? The biggest animal I treat would be, like, a Great Dane or something, and those guys usually aren’t trying to go for my neck at work.”

It occurred to Grian as soon as his statement was out that his boyfriend was probably in a similar situation. Prior to this, he’d never been in a fight against Morphling where the man wasn’t just aiming to injure him. Even if he’d fought the guy in wolf form before, the hero wouldn’t have been trying to kill him.

“So,” Ringmaster prompted. “Your advice is—?”

“Pray,” Grian said. “And if no one listens, at least do your best not to fall over.”

“Ah, my usual method,” the villain replied, nodding and widening his stance. “I can manage that much.”

The wolf did not let them converse any longer. Morphling broke into a full sprint, aiming the whole of its looming form for the villain. Grian gasped, flattening himself against the wall, but Ringmaster did not move. He waited, waited, waited, and the second Morphling's hind legs left the ground, eliminating his ability to change direction, the villain dove to the side.

The wolf hit empty air, and tumbled upon landing. Its front leg was far too weak to support the whole of its body weight like that. Ringmaster must have expected as much, given how quickly he was upon the beast.

His knee landed on the wolf's neck, pinning it to the ground, and he was slashing down with his knife in the same burst of energy. The blade buried itself in the creature's middle, right below its ribs — a deep strike, which Grian knew would deal immense damage.

A howl of pain echoed around them, but Morphling wasn't as immobile as Ringmaster might have hoped. He kicked out with all four of his powerful paws, each lined with razor sharp claws. The villain cursed when one such strike scratched along his calf. The lower half of his pant leg tore, and his skin opened just as easily.

To avoid further damage, Ringmaster removed his knife and scrambled back as fast as he could. The second he was off him, Morphling transformed again. His next shriek of utter agony was wholly human. Grian saw the profusely bleeding wound in the context of a regular person's body, and it was no less ugly.

A shaky hand clutched at his side, the hero gritting his teeth.

"Just great," Morphling muttered. He grabbed onto the wall, hoisting

himself up onto shaky, weakened legs. His face had become unnaturally pale. It was unlikely he would be able to manage another transformation, and with that removed from his repertoire, Morphling was as good as defeated. “You were right, villain. There are a great many things I could have done differently.”

“It’s a little late for regrets,” Ringmaster said. He lifted his knife, inspecting the amount of blood covering it. “Last words would be more appropriate.”

“Right,” Morphling coughed, smiling. His teeth were red. “As if I’d give you *that* honor. What would you even do with my final will and testament, hm? Would you track down my loved ones and wax poetic to them, before blowing up their homes with every last person trapped inside?”

Ringmaster tipped his head forward, once again, becoming defensive at the mention of any of his crimes. Morphling laughed — a punched-out, dying melody when played to the tune of his modulator. Then, his gaze flicked over to the vet, and Grian tensed.

“I doubt he’s told you about that little trick of his, right?” Morphling’s hand squeezed tighter on the branches. “How he tracked down Daybreak’s civilian home, and killed her pets and dear friend for the sake of sending a simple message? That’s the kind of man with whom you’ve allied yourself.”

This information was not new to him. Ringmaster hadn’t outright said it, but Grian had been partially conscious during that phone call. The context clues were there. Morphling had just put it in clearer terms for him. His opinion on the situation didn’t change. Grian still refused to believe Ringmaster would do that, especially when he’d been dodging around any form of death for the entire night.

Grian, to the surprise of both Ringmaster and Morphling, simply shrugged. “Oh well.”

His partner blinked several times, confused. A silent question was shot in his direction, but the civilian did not let his gaze leave their opponent. Morphling’s amusement dropped. He wasn’t going to get the satisfaction he wanted.

“I see,” the hero muttered, something sharp hidden between the syllables. “Maybe you’re not such a noble doctor after all. It was my mistake to have offered you any miniscule kindnesses. I should have gutted you when I had the chance, left you to bleed out in that safehouse.”

At the mention of that dreaded place, Grian’s breath hitched. Flashes of his cold, dark prison wormed themselves to the forefront of his mind. The sheer amount of times he nearly met his end spun in tandem with those memories, until a storm of nausea threatened to tip him over.

For all of his strengths, Grian genuinely faltered at the idea that the heroes’ treatment of him might have been considered any form of kind. Not when his stomach ached, his throat ran dry, his stamina waned, his confidence evaporated, and his health had dwindled until he feared he would ever feel normal again.

Ringmaster lurched forward, as if the declaration had ripped through him just the same. The air dropped by several degrees as he spat, “I would watch what you say next, hero.”

“Why? It’s only the truth,” Morphling returned, mirroring the other’s level of hostility. He leaned forward, staring Grian dead in the eyes as he reemphasized, “I should have kept you starved and weak and docile the entire time. I should have slipped that same poison from

before into your food. I should have cut your throat *myself."*

Ringmaster threw aside his knife and thrusted his open palm out towards the hero. As his fingers curled into a fist, every ounce of color drained from the hero's face at once. A choked gasp tore itself from Morphling's lungs. He began to claw helplessly at the fabric over his own heart.

"What are you–? What's going on?" The hero rasped, able to form words, though his voice was hoarse. "My chest, it feels… so strange. What have you *done?"*

It was Grian's turn to be confused. He looked closer at the hero, searching for any sight of the signature red glow that indicated Ringmaster was using his power. There wasn't a single sign of it. So then, why did Morphling look so scared?"

"What have I done? Nothing yet," Ringmaster hummed, voice low and sickly sweet. "But there is something you should understand about me."

The villain took a step forward.

"My powers are not limited by what I can see," he said. "As long as I can hold my focus, anything within my reach is fair game."

Grian's eyes widened. He stared, enrapt by the scene playing out before him. The vet was not aware he was moving until he'd placed himself by his partner's side, in full view of his shadowed expression.

What was he talking about?

Something clicked into place for Grian. Static rushed to fill his mind.

"The beat of your heart, hero," Ringmaster concluded, a sort of finality to the lilt of his words. "It's *very* easy to latch onto."

"No," Morphling whispered. "No, you can't mean…"

Ringmaster was manipulating the speed of his pulse.

"Oh, but I can," Ringmaster said, eyes crinkling into his signature smile. "I've always been able to. It was a mercy for your sake that I hadn't until now."

Morphling clenched his teeth, legs shaking, like staying upright were a monumental task.

"I want you to know this now, as you're about to die," Ringmaster went on. He leaned in. "Every heist you've stopped, every fight you've almost won, every great scheme you've pulled off without a hitch, it was only because I *allowed you* to keep living."

His fist tightened slightly. The hero screamed, the sound reverberating off the walls and echoing into the night. A pain like that only known in death intertwined with Morphling's voice. Not a soul, living or deceased, in a twenty mile radius could have missed the haunting call.

Green eyes turned themselves upon Grian then, glinting with barely-contained bloodlust. The moment their gazes met, that vanished, replaced with an otherworldly softness. It felt like warm beds,

peaceful nights, full meals, bandages on a fresh wound. It was every bit as much the Scar that Grian knew, connected entirely to the actions of the villain he'd grown to love.

"If you want me to," Scar started, quiet, reserving his gentlest state of being for Grian alone. The vet swayed nearer, drawn in by the lethal sweetness. "I'll stop."

Oh.

Grian swallowed.

Scar was putting the decision in his lap. Scar was opening the door for him to shut it all down. In this moment, if Grian wished it, the other man would abandon his desire for vengeance without question. If Grian wished it, Morphling could leave this alive. If Grian wished it, mercy was still an option.

The vet's heart warmed, helpless to stop the way he fell a little more in love with Scar at every single turn. Even now, while so close to achieving something he clearly wanted, his concern for Grian outweighed all else.

Grian's decision hardly needed any thought.

He stepped closer. "Do it."

The other man sucked in a breath. For a moment, Grian expected him to make a sly comment. Instead, his partner became grave and serious.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Scar’s eyes bore into his soul. “You’ll have to live with this decision forever. Are you *sure* you want me to follow through?”

Grian imagined a world in which they escaped this, returned home to their life together. He imagined the fears that would follow him. He imagined the burden of keeping these things a secret from his closest friends, with the exception of only three. He imagined never sleeping through the night unbothered again.

He imagined enduring all of that hardship with Scar by his side.

“Yes,” Grian whispered. “Please.”

Scar’s eyes crinkled, sad and solemn.

“Of course,” he replied. Scar turned and focused his attention back on the hero. His expression hardened. “Try not to look, Doctor. I want to make this *slow.”*

He squeezed his fist and twisted. Morphling’s mouth dropped open in a wordless scream. His whole body shook, until he was collapsing upon the ground. Grian averted his eyes.

It took five minutes for Morphling to die.

Grian listened to every writhing motion, every stifled breath, every fading sign of life. Though he wasn’t watching, he knew what he would have been able to see — the twitching, the desperation, the

light leaving the hero's eyes, the gagging on nothing, and the tears.

Until, finally, the world went still.

"It's done."

Scar was leaning heavily on his crutch when Grian saw him next. Sweat beaded down his face, and the strain of intense exertion shook in his limbs. Holding his power for quite so long had to have wiped him out. His eyes were indifferent, a practiced kind of detached.

Gradually, the vet let his eyes fall upon the body.

Limp, pale, expressionless, Morphling lay sprawled out in the snow. One hand was pressed against his side, and the other had been outstretched in the vet's direction, as if trying and failing to grab his attention in his final moments.

The snow was soaked crimson with his blood.

Grian did not flinch. He had long since grown used to the smell of iron.

Morphling would not be able to hurt him again.

The vet took his partner by the hand. "Thank you."

But Scar did not hear him. His eyes were focused on something past

Grian, a stiffness to his posture that screamed of danger. Grian whirled around.

He was not expecting to come face-to-face with Terra.

The hero lurked only a few feet away, staring down his nose at the corpse of his teammate, a smile spreading across his face. A wildfire burned in that golden iris of his. “Impressive.”

Grian understood then why Scar had been frozen in place.

Neither of them had heard Terra approach. Neither had noticed until he was practically upon them. There were no tracks in the snow, no shifting branches to indicate an opened door. It was as if he’d sprouted from the ground itself.

“Really, I’m blown away,” Terra continued, no sarcasm in his tone. He shot the two of them a grin, lazy and sincere. It sent a shiver of terror up Grian’s spine. “I didn’t know you could cause heart attacks, Scar. I might’ve called you up a few years earlier if you’d ever let that one slip.”

Scar took Grian by the shoulder and pulled him closer, pointedly putting distance between them and the hero. If the act offended Terra in any way, he gave no indication of it.

“Although, no offense,” the hero chuckled, propping his hands on his hips. “You don’t really look like you could do a repeat of that one for a while longer.”

Scar stayed silent, his grip on Grian tightening. He didn’t seem to

know what to do. Running was pointless when they were surrounded by Terra's domain, but fighting wouldn't end well either. Not until they'd both regained some amount of energy. The newcomer was right to point out how exhausted Scar had become.

"Two of four," Terra said, whistling like that number amazed him. "Tell you what. If you promise to make that a solid one-hundred percent, I'll make this whole process easier for you."

He did not wait for a response.

The hero raised his arms, and made a wide, flourishing gesture, like a conductor leading his orchestra. In turn, the walls reacted with breakneck speed. Grian and Scar startled as the entire barricade to their left shriveled and fell away. It revealed another layer of the maze, but with a secondary swipe of his hands, that too parted at his command, equally as jarring as the first.

However, the resulting scream did not come from them.

On the other side of the fallen plants, Daybreak had pushed herself into the corner, cradling an unconscious Blackhole. Her look of fear and horror rivaled theirs tenfold, especially when she saw the body at their feet.

"Scott! Oh my *God,"* she shrieked. Had there not been someone in her lap, she might have scrambled over to him. As it was, Daybreak was forced to simply stare, modulator crackling around her loud, *"No!"*

"Not a super exciting final fight," Terra said, addressing the pair beside him as if his teammates were not there. "But we can't make a show out of everything, now can we?"

A show? Final fight?

What in the world was Terra talking about? Why wasn't he freaked out by Morphling's death? Why was he acting like they were on the same side? Why was he suggesting they kill yet another hero?

It didn't seem like his teammate had any more information than the two opposing him.

"Terra?" Daybreak heaved for breath, glancing between them. "What… What's going on?"

She swallowed, trembling.

"What happened to–? Why are you–?" Her words were hoarse, desperate. Nothing substantial seemed to be capable of leaving her for several long seconds. Finally, she mustered enough energy to ask, "Where's Necromancer?"

Terra didn't bother sugarcoating it. "Dead, just like him."

He nudged Morphling's corpse with his foot. The lack of a reaction from the man forced a sob out of Daybreak. She appeared to be torn between utter shock and total despair. Learning two of her friends had died in the same breath — she had to be experiencing a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

"Well, no reason to delay," Terra prompted, waving an arm from the villain to his frightened teammate. "I don't imagine we have long before the authorities arrive, despite how many of them we paid off ahead of time. Will it help if I bring the others to us?"

Grian stared at Terra, dumbstruck. Almost numbly, he asked, “The… others?”

Once again, the hero raised his arms. “I guess there’s not much of a use for these anymore.”

Unlike a moment prior, where only a singular wall had come crashing down, the entire earth began to shake. Grian and Scar each let out a little yelp, clutching onto one another to avoid tumbling to the ground. Daybreak ducked her head as well, but Terra remained perfectly upright, unbothered as he brought the whole maze down around them.

Clouds of disturbed snow sprang up around where the walls fell, branches shriveling, unwinding, collapsing at the command of one man. A minute — which felt like a short eternity — passed before the world halted its rupturing again. Terra lowered his arms.

The horizon was clear, no maze or trees anywhere for as far as the eye could see. Though, calling the space a parking lot anymore would’ve been an egregious mistake. Not an inch of the ground was spared from the natural debris created by the spontaneous structure.

“Guys!”

Scar and Grian turned at the call. Lizzie and Jimmy sprinted towards them, concern clear as day on their faces. The newly-arrived villains practically threw themselves in front of the stunned pair, blocking Terra’s straightforward view. Lizzie brandished her spear, and Jimmy his knife.

The hero just raised an unimpressed brow. “Right,” he hummed. “Since we’re all present, can we please get back to the business of killing my teammates?”

Lizzie and Jimmy paused, experiencing the same shock as the two behind them.

“What?” Jimmy spoke up. “You… want us to *kill* your team? What are you *on* about?”

A distressed noise drew several sets of eyes over to the pair of heroes on the ground. Daybreak had begun to shuffle backwards, clutching onto Blackhole like he was her only anchor to reality.

“No! *Please,* no!” Daybreak wailed, modulator crackling. She threw herself over the body in her arms, shielding Blackhole as best she could, but it was hardly anything. “You’ve already taken my dogs, my friends — not him! You *can’t* take him too!”

The man was so pale that it was honestly hard to tell if he was still alive. Really, they should have gone straight to a hospital after leaving the theater. Grian didn’t understand why they hadn’t until he saw one last detail, only visible with the new angle presented to them when Daybreak crumpled forward.

A thorny vine had wrapped itself around the hero’s ankle, cutting into her skin and keeping her firmly rooted. She was trapped, a flightless bird. Unable to run, unable to seek help, unable to save the one member of her team she had left, only leaving her with the choice of pleading miserably for both of their lives.

Grian was not the only amongst them to notice her dilemma.

“BigB.” Lizzie’s voice broke everyone from their trance. She was somber, her expression unreadable, but her grip on her spear had not loosened. For the first time since Morphling died, the group watched Terra wince. “What are you doing?”

With the way he reacted, it didn’t take much for Grian to realize that BigB was Terra’s civilian name. The hero obviously hadn’t expected to hear it in this context. It struck deep.

His faux-friendliness evaporated, leaving behind a hollow shell. No light shone in his yellow eye, and no emotion reached his features. Grian remembered this exact look from when he’d first met Terra — haunting, still, statuesque, like there wasn’t a thing in this world that could reach him.

It was the kind of unnatural countenance that made every other piece of personality from Terra feel as if it existed just to hide this truth underneath. It was the kind of outward numbness that solidified the fact that this man had endured ungodly hours of torture during his time in prison. It was the kind of familiar half-dead air that reminded the vet that he had been *so close* to becoming the exact same way.

“I’m finally getting my freedom,” Terra answered. That yellow eye met Grian’s gaze. “No matter what it takes.”

No matter what.

Grian’s skin was so cold that a sudden burst of wind threatened to rip him open. The temperature reached to his core, digging icy fingers into his resolve.

He understood, suddenly, what Terra had done.

Going along with the rest of the Gs in this kidnapping plot, but secretly growing himself a failsafe maze beneath the parking lot the whole time — it was a plan atop a plan. He was playing every side at once, doing anything to ensure he stayed at the top.

Terra had to have recognized that there was a significant margin of error in the Gs' original scheme. Being the only villain amongst them, and someone who knew the Bamboozlers personally, he was probably the sole individual with the experience necessary to see the bigger ramifications of kidnapping Grian. The trio would be enraged, would stop at nothing to fight on their own terms, would never rest until they tracked down their missing friend.

His solution had been an invisible trap directly outside of their hideout. There, at least, he could have total control over what happened to those stuck inside of it. If he wanted them separated, they would be separated. If he wanted them tied down, they'd be tied down. If he decided they should be forced together to fight to the death, then what choice would they have?

In the end, Terra had been correct to make those alternative arrangements. The Gs had failed to achieve freedom through their attempted manipulation of the justice system. The Bamboozlers were winning, Grian was alive, and Terra had been forced to utilize the maze.

One version of his play had gone awry. His backup was in full swing.

The end goal of this one, however, was wholly intriguing to the vet.

"He wants *you* guys to be the ones to kill the Gs," Grian muttered. "So

that when this is investigated later, they'll blame the villains, and have absolutely no proof that he encouraged you to follow through."

In other words…

"Freedom," Terra repeated. "Like I said."

The fatal cost had simply changed from the Bamboozlers to the Gs.

"But *why,"* Lizzie butted in. "Why are you so insistent on using us as scapegoats? Why couldn't you have just accepted our help years ago? Why couldn't you have stayed with us, kept being yourself, kept being our friend?"

"Because they *killed* that version of me, Liz," Terra blurted, and by the flicker of regret that immediately flashed through his gaze, it was clear he hadn't actually *meant* to reply. Lizzie watched him with furrowed brows. He sighed, "I was never going to be able to be the person you knew again. For years, all I've wanted is revenge and freedom, and *this* is the only way I can get both."

He took a step back.

Daybreak jumped as the plant holding her captive shriveled and died. At the same time, the yellow in Terra's eye faded into a regular, dark brown iris. Grian nearly gasped as the half of the hero's body that was encased in bark shifted and retracted too, until the entirety of his costume had curled into a small, wooden imitation of a watch upon his wrist.

His identity was left on full display.

Grian bit his cheek to keep in the noise of surprise that threatened to bubble up.

The newly-revealed half of Terra's face bore one, massive scar from the top of his forehead to the curve of his jaw, arcing through his brow and catching the corner of his lip. As a result, his once-hidden eye was cloudy and unseeing.

He was partially *blind.*

The old injury itself was clean, slashed by steady, skilled hands. Immediately, the vet knew that this had not come from the aftermath of a battle, or some horrible accident. It was purposeful, meant to damage, meant to last, meant to serve as a physical reminder of the torture Terra had endured.

Undoubtedly, it doubled as an identifying trait, one the Agency's specialists could've used to track the man down, even if he had chosen not to ever reenter the scene as a villain again.

"I'm sorry that I had to use you to get what I needed," Terra said, and for some reason, despite all the lies and half-truths he'd spouted up until that moment, this felt like total honesty. "I'm sorry that I would do it again in a heartbeat if I had to."

Terra took another step back.

"For the record," he added, gaze focused only on Lizzie. "I'm glad we didn't have to kill you. Do me a favor and get out of this next situation too, okay?"

Grian's ears caught on the sound of a whirring somewhere not too far off. It was more prominent than the rest of the city's loud noises. The thrumming stole the eyes of all three Bamboozlers as well, the whole group searching for what *had* to be authorities finally arriving on scene.

When they turned back towards where Terra had been standing, he was gone. Not a trace of him remained. No footsteps. No plants. He had simply vanished.

Scar cursed and rocked forward on his crutch. "Oh, great. He's getting away! Come on, guys, we have to–!"

Both Lizzie and Grian caught Scar's sleeve before he could seriously start pursuing the runaway.

"Don't," Lizzie told him. "If he wants to try and escape from his problems, let him. Whether or not he gets his freedom is up to him now."

Scar's brow twitched.

He looked to Grian next, that perpetual concern of his returning. "Are you alright with that? Just letting him go?"

A valid question.

After all, Grian was the one that had been most affected by Terra's plot. He had endured torment, neglect, torture at the hands of that

man — not any of the rest of them. His broken arm served as proof.

But Terra wasn't Morphling or Necromancer, who both remained a threat until their dying breath, and saw the pain of others as a mere tool at their disposal. He was someone stuck in a system, desperate to get out. He was someone who had been fighting for so long for this very moment. He was someone who would hold an endless grudge if they stopped him now.

"Yes, let him go," Grian replied. And he meant it. A fatigue like no other settled in his bones, spurred on by the cold and the pounding aches that littered his body. He slumped against Scar, allowed a strong arm to wrap around him. "It's okay."

"If you say so." Scar sounded hesitant, but he relaxed into Grian's touch all the same. "And the other two?"

The vet turned his head, glancing down at where Daybreak had collapsed atop Blackhole, muttering to herself. Grian wondered if the latter was still breathing, if he would even make it to a hospital at that point.

"Leave them," Grian said. "They're not worth it."

Besides, they had much bigger things to worry about.

The once-distant whirring came to a head as a sleek, black car burst into the parking lot. Its headlights blinded the gathered group, and its engine roared as it seemed to pick up speed. The vehicle bounced over piles of fallen branches, tires squealing, yet never slowing. Grian's heart leapt into his throat, a sudden certainty that they were about to be hit washing over him.

With a shriek and the smell of burning rubber, the car skidded and spun in a full circle, before grinding to a complete halt. The driver's side door flew open fast enough to almost disconnect it from its hinges. A blur of movement rolled out onto the pavement, metal glinting in the street lights.

The authorities had arrived.

"Stop right there, villains!"

A triumphant cry echoed out over the empty lot. Lizzie's hands flew up to her mask in surprise, and Grian's jaw almost dropped.

Furioso stood before them, twin swords at the ready.

The vet almost sobbed with relief. Out of every possible hero to arrive on the scene, the one that was on their side was a bittersweet mercy from the universe. Joel probably knew what was going on, had probably come to help in some secretive way.

Grian's celebrations, however, were a bit hasty.

The passenger door opened, and Slayer climbed out into the open, a loaded crossbow pointed directly at their heads. "Of course it's *you,"* she hissed, her modulator sharp. "You three have a lot of explaining to do."

Her presence immediately balanced out Furioso's in a single moment. Slayer was decidedly *not* on their side, and never would be in a

million years.

Beneath her leafy mask, Slayer's eyes landed on Grian, and her posture changed. She straightened, lips parting in surprise, like she hadn't expected to see a civilian in the mix. Ringmaster stepped in front of Grian, shielding him with his body. "Relax, hero. We don't want any more trouble."

From over his partner's shoulder, the vet was just able to make out how Slayer's gaze flicked down to the corpse at their feet, and the two injured heroes huddled nearby.

"What happened to—?" Her words shook, mouth falling open and closed rapidly as she failed to vocalize her thoughts. "Oh my God. Oh my *God."*

Grian winced, a new kind of terror sneaking up on him.

Slayer didn't know the situation, hadn't been involved in any way. She wasn't like Furioso, with an insight due to his relationship. She couldn't have been aware that she was showing up to a crime scene caused by her own coworkers. All she would be seeing at that moment was a burning building, three people she'd known personally in critical condition, and the criminals that had been missing for weeks appearing in the center of it.

And in comparison to the Gs, the Bamboozlers looked perfectly unharmed. A few scratches here and there, a new crutch under Ringmaster's arm, but nothing to the level of what the heroes had experienced.

"What happened?"

Furioso was shockingly solemn. His tone didn't waver, didn't pitch up into a scream, didn't give off anything except a reserved, almost unnerving steadiness.

Grian wondered what that meant in the context of this man. He knew of Joel, had heard Lizzie talk about him enough to feel like they were almost acquaintances, but they didn't actually *know* each other. There was no telling how much of this situation made sense to him already, how much of it was an act, or how much the sight of Morphling's dead body affected him.

There did exist a world in which he cared a great deal for the man that had died, and in which Lizzie had not told him anything. It was possible Furioso was equally as taken aback as his teammate. It was possible this was simply the calm before the storm, and he would seek vengeance in his fallen friend's name.

Furioso's eyes shifted up, resting briefly on Grian. The vet's worries melted away as something like recognition filtered into his expression.

Suddenly, there wasn't a doubt in Grian's mind — the hero knew who he was.

"It's a long story," Ringmaster replied, putting on a façade of total confidence. "And one we would be more than happy to explain if given the opportunity."

"That won't be necessary."

The three villains tensed as the car's rear door swung open. A tall

figure slipped from the back seat, heels clicking against the cracked concrete. Salt and pepper hair was pinned up in a tight bun, and square glasses rested upon the bridge of a curved nose. Dark brows furrowed above narrowed purple eyes, harsh wrinkles lined tanned skin.

A woman in a pinstripe pantsuit regarded them with a detached, unreadable look. Her voice was vaguely familiar as she declared, “I already know a great deal.”

“No way,” Boogeyman whispered. “It couldn’t be…”

Ringmaster nodded, eyes wide. “The Watcher.”

Grian’s jaw dropped. All the blood rushed to his head, fast enough to nearly cause him to black out. For a second, he thought he had, because there was no way this wasn’t a dream.

The Watcher.

The Watcher — Head of the Agency, an anonymous woman in charge of every single aspect of the city’s heroes, who gave government officials a run for their money, and practically restructured their justice system with her own two hands.

That Watcher was supposedly standing right in front of them?

It wasn’t possible. Never in a million years. No way. No *way*.

And then, Grian realized that he *did* recognize her voice. He'd heard it once before, in a recording shown to them after his partner had been poisoned. A recording that featured only three distinct individuals — Mr. Keeper, an irritated secretary, and the Watcher herself.

The air given off by this woman was not that of a mere secretary.

His heart beat in his throat.

Oh *God,* it really *was* her, wasn't it? The Watcher was here, right in front of them, staring into their souls with two of the top heroes escorting her.

But *why?*

Grian could tell each of the Bamboozlers was asking the same internal question. Ringmaster and Boogeyman were exchanging glances, and Eclipse had honed in on Furioso, staring daggers at him. He gave a subtle shake of his head, and widened his eyes in response, like he was trying to say, *"I didn't tell her."*

Which was actually *more* disconcerting. If the Agency's head had decided the situation warranted an in-person appearance along with two of her top heroes, obviously she had to be somewhat aware of the situation at hand.

The Watcher clicked her tongue, tipping her chin up to better see the burning building in the distance. "I suppose I should have expected this level of destruction, given the circumstances."

Her eyes scanned over the gathered group, though they avoided the

corpse, as though it were inconvenient to dwell on it. Once her gaze had reached the end of their assembly, she sighed, final and heavy.

“Furioso,” she said, and the hero straightened so quickly that Grian worried he’d lock his knees and pass out. “Arrest them.”

At the sound of handcuffs being removed from the hero’s belt, every Bamboozler present lurched forward. It was Ringmaster who made the deciding move, however.

Grian could only watch as the grenade from before was brought into the open, its pin pulled, and it was thrown full-force at the Watcher’s face. In the exact same breath, a red light encapsulated it, and it paused in the air.

An armed explosive, primed and ready to burst, stopped only by Ringmaster’s powers. The ones he’d almost completely exhausted while killing Morphling a few minutes prior.

“If you even think about it,” Ringmaster huffed. “I’ll make sure it’s the last thing you do.”

Grian was lightheaded.

The Watcher seemed less impressed. She raised a hand, as if reaching out to pluck an apple from a tree.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Eclipse warned. The Watcher stopped. “His power relies on focus. Do anything to distract him from his target, and you won’t like the results. I suggest you listen to us, now.”

Grian shot a baffled look in her direction.

Was that an actual threat? Was there a genuine risk of his partner losing control here? Why was he the only one that appeared scared? Had any of the Bamboozlers realized that they weren't far enough away from their opponents to be safe from a potential blast zone? The heroes, at least, could duck behind the car, but what were *they* supposed to do if this went south? Had they even thought this out?

"My, my," the Watcher laughed, the noise a raspy, wheezing thing. "It has been quite a while since I've had the pleasure of negotiations under threat of death. I can't say I'm not intrigued."

Grian's flabbergasted expression whirled on her.

Had *everyone* around him gone mad?

"Perfect," Eclipse replied. She stepped forward and placed herself at the forefront of the group. As Ringmaster was otherwise occupied, and Boogeyman was Boogeyman, she slipped easily into the role of the leader. "We have only a couple of demands."

"I'm listening," the Watcher said, tilting her head and smiling. "Make it quick."

"First things first," Eclipse began. "We're leaving here alive, free, and without anyone on our tails."

The Watcher nodded, prompting her to continue, though no verbal

agreement was given yet.

“Second, you’re taking full responsibility for the events that happened here tonight.” Eclipse stuck a finger out, ensuring the Agency’s head understood. “No media crews, no headlines, no interviews, not even a classified report to file this mess as our fault. It was all you.”

“Oh?” The Watcher blinked, a snort of amusement coming from her. “Was it really?”

Grian briefly stowed his fear of the active bomb in their midst to be impressed. It seemed like the villains had these terms preprepared. Maybe this was part of their training — understanding what terms to ask for while holding the most powerful person in the city hostage.

“An alternative is pinning it on your creepy little underlings,” Eclipse suggested, jabbing that same finger down at the heroes on the ground. “But any deaths, injuries, or bits of property damage caused by our hands was in self defense. They stole from us, refused multiple attempts at peace, and did not flee when given the chance.”

The Watcher, once again, fell silent.

Eclipse took it as confirmation. “Third, there is never to be a repeat of this. If anyone, and I do mean *anyone,* tries to best us by using our doctor as bait again, we’ll wipe this city off the face of the map.”

All three present Agency officials, including the head, grimaced.

“I assure you, Ms. Eclipse,” the Watcher replied. “We are well aware of that. There is a reason our… *regulated* staff has never attempted it

before.”

Grian sucked in a breath, a warmth spreading through him fast enough to stave off the winter chill. Maybe he was losing his mind a little bit too, if he thought his friends threatening to kill thousands of people in his name was sweet.

“Lastly… you are not to attempt to track down and arrest the hero Terra.” Both Boogeyman and Ringmaster glanced at Eclipse as she said that, like they hadn’t expected it. Grian heard her swallow. “He is not in league with the other rats in your establishment, and he is under our protection now. For your own safety, do not engage with him again.”

At this, the Watcher paused.

“The hero Terra?” Her eyes narrowed further. “I was of the mind that you two did not… associate anymore.”

Eclipse’s hand twitched around her spear, clearly itching to put it to use. Any mention of Terra, whether initiated by herself or not, made her defensive. Still, she remained strong, and gave a curt nod.

“You are correct,” Eclipse said. “But unless you are keen on dying in a fiery explosion, those are the terms on the table for you.”

A beat of silence passed. The wind whistled past, and Grian ducked further behind Scar to remain out of its direct path.

“Right,” the Watcher huffed. “So, you’d like to wash your hands of this, go home, and never think about it again? That is all you want?”

Eclipse nodded once more.

“Goodness, I’m almost disappointed to accept,” the woman sighed, propping her chin in her hands. “I was hoping for far more. The Head of the Agency’s life is in your hands, and you only want to run? No ransom, cold hard cash, or pardon for previous wrongdoings?”

Furioso and Slayer both turned to their boss, shock evident in their eyes.

Boogeyman straightened too, though for a different reason. “How much cash are we talking?”

Eclipse elbowed him in the gut. “Yes, that’s it. Temporary immunity from arrest and permanent safety for our loved ones.”

Slightly different wording, Grian noticed. *Clever.*

It had gone up from just protecting their doctor, to any and all loved ones. Only the Bamboozlers caught how she seemed to sway towards Furioso. Using this moment to set the stage for future transgressions and trickery against the Agency was a brilliant play by their very own.

The Watcher, with her guard lowered by the innocent phrasing, did not see the trap.

“Fine. The Agency accepts each of those conditions,” she declared. “Do you need it in writing, or was spoken word enough?”

Lizzie clicked a button on her watch. “Already got everything I needed.”

“Excellent,” the Watcher chimed, clapping her hands together. “Now, do get this dreadful thing away from me, if you don’t mind.”

Eclipse moved forward, and pressed a button on her spear. The mechanisms inside of it clicked, shifting and retracting until all that remained was a short, metal stick. She positioned herself just so, pulling her weapon back over her shoulder. Once she was decidedly ready, she nodded, and the red glow fell away.

Instantly, the villain’s makeshift bat snapped into it. The grenade bounced off and went flying in the direction of the burning theater. It never reached the ground, however, as a loud boom echoed through the sky. Bits of shrapnel flew everywhere, raining down upon the earth.

Grian gaped at the horrific firework display, acutely aware of the fact that Eclipse missing that hit or Ringmaster’s powers failing in the middle of their conversation would have resulted in *that* happening to *them.* He felt himself growing grey hairs.

“Good. Now, where were we?” The Watcher exhaled and adjusted a crease in her jacket. She snapped her fingers. “Oh, yes, I remember! Furioso, arrest them.”

Eclipse, Boogeyman, and Ringmaster jolted, betrayal jumping into their expressions instantly. Furioso, however, had his eyes set on a completely different target.

“I apologize for the earlier confusion,” the Watcher interjected, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning back on the car. “For all the trouble you have certainly caused me this evening, *you* were never the individuals under arrest.”

Furioso knelt beside Daybreak. The scarlet hero made a noise of surprise as her hands were pried off Blackhole’s body and pinned behind her back. Furioso then moved to check the unconscious man’s pulse. His brows furrowed, and he lifted a hand to his ear.

“Ambulance four and six, please proceed onto the scene,” he said, and immediately, the hum of two more engines entered into the parking lot. Furioso lowered his hand, and addressed the Watcher. “He’s barely hanging in there. The healing specialists will have to see him right away.”

Grian’s eyes widened.

Blackhole was *alive.*

“Fine,” the Watcher sighed. Flashing red and white lights formed a halo around her head as the two vehicles pulled up next to them. She lifted a hand, and they opened their doors. A team of medics rushed off the nearest one with a stretcher, paying no mind to the villains as they began to load Blackhole onto it. “It’s better to have more than one surviving member in custody, I suppose.”

Another pair came in with a second stretcher and a white sheet. They loaded up Morphling’s body and took him to the other ambulance. Daybreak was dragged to her feet, and pulled, limping, to the black car. Furioso pushed her inside, ignoring her protests.

“Wait,” Ringmaster said, his voice strained. “How do you know… that

these are the only survivors?"

The Watcher pursed her lips. She considered the question for a bit, before shrugging. "No harm in revealing that little nugget of information, I guess."

She made yet another gesture with her hands and two familiar faces hopped out of the back of the other ambulance. Grian could not stop himself from tensing.

Werewolf and Audiophile took their places beside Slayer, each wearing a hardened, wary expression. The former of the two looked an absolute mess, hair hardly brushed and costume askew in every way possible. Even through his tinted sunglasses, Grian could feel the vigilante staring at him.

Right, so *that* was how they knew Necromancer was dead. Everything made sense. Werewolf had also been under her control, and would've felt the exact moment that shattered. It was probably how the Agency's head had discovered quite a bit about the unfolding situation.

"Tell me," the Watcher started, glancing from Werewolf to the group of villains. She outstretched her arm and pointed one, well-manicured finger at Ringmaster. "Is that the man you mentioned?"

"Yes, the vet," Werewolf confirmed. "It's him."

Grian startled as it dawned on him that she was not, in fact, pointing at his partner at all. He could feel all three Bamboozlers looking in his direction. They probably wouldn't know about that yet.

“Necromancer foiled my attempts to rescue him by commanding me away,” Werewolf went on. “Thankfully, they did not give an instruction to keep quiet, or we might never have known about this.”

“If I hadn’t asked him about his day, and heard him talk about all that horrible stuff like it was nothing,” Audiophile added. “We’d have been in the dark completely.”

“I see,” the Watcher hummed. “Vet, come out from behind your wards.”

Being the sole subject of the woman’s attention was a daunting thing. A boulder settled upon Grian’s shoulders. Lethargy, fatigue, weeks worth of stress, every injury he’d ever sustained, and a million other ailments flared at once. He wanted to throw up, or faint, or both.

Ringmaster looked similarly uncomfortable. “We *just* agreed to leave the doctor out of this.”

“Nonsense,” the Watcher scoffed. “We agreed not to use him against you. Step aside whilst I’m still feeling generous.”

Grian did not like the underlying threat in that, but he still didn’t move, and neither did his partner. Both of them were far too stubborn. It took Eclipse grabbing Ringmaster by the sleeve and forcefully yanking him aside for the Watcher’s wishes to be fulfilled.

The old woman’s eyes widened, and Werewolf’s hands flew up to cover his mouth.

“Oh dear,” the Watcher muttered, nose scrunching. “You poor thing.

How are you standing?”

“And out in this weather! His fingertips are turning blue,” Werewolf fretted. Without checking that it would be alright, he rushed forward, stopping a foot away when Ringmaster’s knife threatened to cut his throat. His hands raised in surrender. “I was just… going to give him my coat.”

Ringmaster watched him with narrowed eyes, but slowly lowered his blade. The vigilante, exactly like he’d said, slipped off the massive, fur coat that had been draped over his shoulders. Grian accepted it, blinking, too stunned to say anything.

Although, as much as he was amazed by the act of kindness, he didn’t dwell on it for long. He wrapped the garment around his frame, careful not to jostle his injured arm, and nearly collapsed from the sheer warmth flooding his system. The vet hadn’t noticed how numb he’d been previously.

“I’m sorry it took me this long,” Werewolf said. “To come and get you, I mean. So much trouble could have been saved. I don’t deserve my title as the city’s protector.”

He bowed his head. Grian let out a shaky breath. “It’s okay, really.”

Even if Werewolf was correct, and that a lifetime’s worth of pain would have been avoided if they’d succeeded back then, it wasn’t a situation he could control. Necromancer had been a strong opponent, and they were out of their depth.

Grian was never going to hold a grudge against the one good guy that had actually attempted to save him.

Werewolf rose to his full height, and placed his hand over his heart. “To make amends for my shortcomings, I’ve struck a deal with the Agency on your behalf.”

“What?” Boogeyman stepped forward, sizing up the vigilante. *“You* made a deal on behalf of *our* doctor?”

The vigilante had the wherewithal to seem slightly embarrassed. “I apologize, but I really do think you’ll want to take my offer.”

The Watcher raised a hand to her earpiece.

“Ambulance three, please proceed onto the scene.”

A third ambulance appeared, pulling up to where they’d gathered. The driver hopped out and opened the back door.

“In exchange for four exclusive favors,” the Watcher said, amusement and disgust twisting into a unique shape upon her lips. “Werewolf has convinced me to allow you, the doctor of my greatest enemies, to be accepted into the care of my top healers.”

The Bamboozlers and Grian froze. The vet choked out a hoarse, “Excuse me?”

“Before you get any ideas, though,” the Watcher added. “This deal is for you, and you alone. I draw the line at patching up the criminals that already plague my city as is. ”

Healers.

Grian would have had to be stupid not to know what the Watcher was referring to, but his mind couldn't comprehend it. The Agency had a medical wing, reserved for only the most devastating of injuries, and their very own heroes. Within their walls, they had gathered a team of individuals whose gifts for healing were unrivaled by any others.

The Agency kept those few close to their chest, leaving only a few less powerful healers to visit the various hospitals around the city. They were an anomaly, as anonymous and mysterious as the Watcher herself due to the sheer effectiveness of their gifts threatening their daily peace.

And they were being offered to *him?*

"I know," the woman sighed. "I can't believe I agreed to it either. Alas, here it is. The ambulance will take you straight there."

"What?" Grian gaped. He latched onto Ringmaster's arm as an anchor, certain he was on the brink of unconsciousness. "Like, right now? You want me to go with you… right now?"

"Of course," she said, like that much was obvious. Her eyes trailed to his hand placement. "And you can bring your little friends with you too, if that's your dilemma. I promise them safety for the extent of your stay."

Allowing villains into the Agency was a tactical move. As nonchalant as she was pretending to be, the Watcher needed him to agree. Eclipse had gotten her to agree to terms about their privacy, but no doubt the

heroes would want a similar assurance from him, and this was the best way to get that. Why would he want to reveal the nasty truth of his situation to the public when they had provided him with such splendid care?

Healers that could treat any physical ailment — that was unimaginable. His broken rib, his arm, his scrapes, and his bruises. Oh *God,* and how could he forget about the burn, the tremble, the injury that threatened his entire livelihood?

The three villains were stunned to silence, and Grian wasn't any different. He turned to them, desperate for an answer.

How much could they trust that the Watcher would keep her word? How did they know they weren't walking into the lion's den? How did they know they'd ever be able to get back out? Once they were there, very little could be done if they realized things were going south. No matter how tempting, the risk was immeasurable.

"It's… kind, certainly," Grian said, trying to ease his nerves by addressing Werewolf instead of the Watcher. "But we *can't* just–"

"I propose a trade."

Every eye moved to Eclipse again. She raised a hand and pointed at Furioso.

"To ensure no foul play, we'll take him," she decided. "Your top hero for our doctor."

A chorus of gasps rose from those gathered. Even the medics paused

their loading of their patients to stare.

The Watcher sat up straight, shock, rage, and disbelief spilling from her usually-calm countenance. “What? You want a *hostage?”*

Eclipse did not back down. She met the other woman’s gaze easily, head held high.

However, Slayer was not willing to take this perceived slight lying down. “Are you crazy? You have the Head of the Agency on record swearing not to hurt you, and yet, you want our top hero?”

“Please understand that records have meant very little to us recently,” Eclipse bit back. “Considering how, last I checked, your Gs took an oath against murder live on television during their debuts. Extra measures are absolutely in order.”

Slayer puffed up her chest, clearly ready to turn this into a full-blown argument, when Furioso stepped in between the two of them. His hands were raised placatingly. “Guys, calm down,” he said. “I don’t… actually mind that idea all that much.”

The Watcher and Slayer both whirled on their coworker, wearing matching expressions of utter shock. The latter shrieked, “You *what?”*

“I can hold my own against them,” the man defended. Neither of them seemed to notice the way Furioso’s ears had tinged pink. Grian did, though, and he was pretty sure Ringmaster and Boogeyman would as well. “And it would only be for a short while, right? The healers will have the vet in perfect condition in, like, a week.”

“A week,” the Watcher echoed, pinching the bridge of her nose. She looked faint. “A week without one of our top heroes…”

“We won’t touch a hair on his sweet head,” Ringmaster butted in. His eyes were crinkled, thick with mischief. “Promise.”

A minute passed.

The Watcher exhaled sharply, glancing at Werewolf. The vigilante had his hands clasped, a pleading pout on his lips. Audiophile had mirrored his position to add extra emphasis.

“Fine,” she relented. “Get in the damn ambulance already.”

The Bamboozlers grinned at each other, a joy like no other spreading through them. Boogeyman slapped Ringmaster on the back, and Eclipse shared a private smile with Furioso through their masks.

Grian felt woozy.

That was it, then. He was out. This hell was over. He was going to the hospital. He was going to heal. Really, truly *heal*.

Tears clouded his vision.

Ringmaster took his hand, and gently tugged him in the direction of the waiting ambulance. Boogeyman followed behind them, while Eclipse remained in the lot beside her boyfriend. The last Grian saw of the Watcher, she was massaging her temples and chatting with

Slayer.

Then, someone was rushing forward helping to strap him into the stretcher. It was padded, comfortable, and welcoming, if he ignored the way the medic couldn't stop trembling from his close proximity to Ringmaster while beginning to administer basic care. The ambulance doors shut. Grian's fingers remained intertwined with his partner's own.

Every single sensation crashed over him at once. Grian couldn't help it. His eyes fell shut. He was unconscious before the drive had even begun.

Consciousness was warm, soft, slow.

It was the sound of beeping, slow breaths, distant chatter from a room beyond. It was the feeling of a hand in his own, steady and unwavering. Grian's eyes opened gradually, vision spinning and blurred by the fading effects of sleep. His mind was lethargic, gelatine, out of reach.

The distance was nice. Even as he began to see the world coming into focus around him, he felt as though he were floating above it all. Nothing could get him. Nothing could hurt him. Nothing could disturb him.

For the first time in so, *so long,* he was safe.

"You're awake," came the sweetest voice Grian had ever heard. It was as electric as the river of serenity flowing through his veins, and yet, at the same time, it brought him back to himself. No longer was he soaring above the world. His sight was his own, and he was utilizing it completely to take in the vision at his bedside. "Hey, Grian."

Green eyes glistened with tears, a smile tugged up on lovely pink lips, and a strong face melted into relief. Nothing more beautiful had ever graced their universe.

"Hi, Scar," Grian murmured. His tongue was heavy, but the words tasted so right.

How long had it been since he'd been able to say them? Free of worry,

free of strife, just a simple greeting, just a simple name, and yet, incomprehensibly valuable. How long had it been since they had slipped from his lips without intense consideration?

Grian swallowed down the lump forming in his throat. Something like nostalgia waited in Scar's smile, kind and real and inches away. The vet could imagine nothing besides reaching up and stealing a kiss. His hands twitched in Scar's, though he did not attempt to pull away. He was content to watch in awe as his boyfriend looked back at him.

"Has anyone… ever told you…" Grian heard himself say, though he hadn't even registered that he'd wanted to start speaking, so the question was left to hang in the air unfinished. He trailed off, suddenly not entirely sure where he'd been going. His brows furrowed, and his mouth opened and closed several times.

Scar was blessedly patient with him. "Has anyone ever told me… What?"

Grian frowned. "I forgot."

His boyfriend laughed, quiet and private, just for Grian to witness. "Did you, now?"

The crinkles beside his eyes, and the dimples on his cheeks put the very sun to shame. Grian could not remember another time in his life in which anyone had made him long to be beside them forever. Time after time, he'd eventually grow tired of people's presence. He was never the type to crave company over quiet. Friends were lovely, but solitude was equally as appreciated. Until the Bamboozlers, until *Scar,* until his whole world had shifted to revolve around the way he looked at him.

“I’m not surprised,” Scar said, blissful amusement overflowing from his gaze. Grian wanted to cup his hands over the other's face to try and catch half the stardust that seemed to radiate from him. “They’ve got you on a lot of drugs right now.”

Drugs — yeah, that sounded right. Grian remembered wanting those. *Badly.*

It explained the drowsiness too, and the way all of his thoughts seemed a little too mismatched. It explained why he couldn’t stop hooking the whole of his attention on tiny details, like the curve of his partner’s lips, the warmth of the room around them, the way his tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Yeah, they’d given him the good stuff.

While Grian was distracted by his own thoughts, Scar took the opportunity to lean closer, pressing a kiss to his cheek. Bursts of tingling giddiness sprung from the contact, and distantly, the vet heard the beeping of a heart monitor begin to increase in pace.

Unfortunately for him, so too did Scar. His eyes widened, that soft smile creeping into a terrifying grin. “Well, well, well,” his partner snickered. “Either you’ve spontaneously started having heart palpitations, or there’s some big feelings going on right about now.”

Grian had the wherewithal to recognize the jab for what it was. He took the edge of his blanket and fumbled to pull it over his head. It was impossible to tell if he’d begun to blush through all the other sensations, but he still wanted to hide his face.

“Not my fault,” he muttered, muffled by fabric. Scar was laughing in the background. Beneath his covers, it was dark and comfortable. He

missed the other's face, but his eyes grew heavy again, and a yawn pushed through him. "It's the… drugs."

"I don't think painkillers have this side effect, G," his partner protested. He pulled back the covers, temporarily blinding Grian as he was exposed to the bright lights above. Scar practically cooed, *"Oh,* someone's looking sleepy again."

"No," Grian argued, just for the sake of arguing. It had no weight, of course, because his eyes had already fallen shut. "I'm… awake."

"Sure," Scar said. He pressed another kiss to Grian's cheek. "Get some rest. I'll be here when you wake up."

That was all Grian needed to hear. He dozed off into a calming, dreamless sleep.

Scar traced small patterns into the skin of Grian's knuckle. Big, black eyes stared up at him, significantly more clarity in them than there had been during his last bout of wakefulness. "Good morning," Scar said. "How are you feeling?"

"Um… Less like I'm floating, for sure," Grian replied, blinking several times and looking around. "So, this is the Agency, huh?"

"Yeah, it is." Scar couldn't help the smile that rose to his lips. "Funny, you didn't even think about that the last time you were awake. You were too busy staring at me."

To his absolute delight, the beeping in the room sped up, even as Grian's face didn't change. "Hm," the vet hummed. "Strange. Wonder why I would do a thing like that…"

A happiness unlike any other swelled inside Scar's chest, until it felt like he was about to burst. He squeezed his partner's hand, just barely stopping himself from tugging him into the tightest hug humanly possible. His ribs were still healing, and would need several more sessions with the Agency's specialists before pressure was able to be safely applied.

Still, it was difficult to hold back.

Weeks without Grian. Weeks of solitude. Weeks of worrying, stressing, praying, fighting to get him again, and he was finally *here.* Now, Scar couldn't stop obsessing over every rise and fall of his chest or twitch of his brow or involuntary noise from his mouth. He wanted to commit each second to memory.

But it wasn't a race. Grian was within reach. No one was going to take him again. No one was left that *could* take him.

He'd witnessed Necromancer fall dead upon the stage. He'd watched the light leave Morphling's eyes, felt his powers bending reality around the hero's heart. He'd seen firsthand how the Watcher had regarded the two remaining Gs — like puppets that had broken free of their strings, and were useless to her now. Not a single member of that team would see the light of day again, whether the rest of their existence was spent behind bars or six feet deep.

Scar had time.

He took deep, practiced breaths.

The hush of Grian's oxygen tank, the beep of his heart monitor, and the drip of his IV were such familiar background noises that he hardly noticed them at all anymore, except for when one acted up. It was easy to lean back in the provided chair, and forget that they were currently resting in the most dangerous facility in the city for villains.

There were little details that gave it away, though. The guards outside the door, the quiet from the hall, the shattered microphone and cameras thrown into the corner after the Bamboozlers had done a thorough sweep of the room — those features reminded him that this wasn't home.

Other than her relentless attempts at gathering information from under their noses, the Watcher's promise of safety had remained intact. Grian was only visited by doctors or nurses, each more skilled than the last, and the Bamboozlers encountered no trouble upon entering the building. It was still done in secret, of course, to avoid an

accidental sighting, but it was hardly a hassle.

They wore their masks to protect their identities, and large hoods to keep outside eyes from recognizing those same masks. From there, all they had to do was speak to a security guard outside the rear exterior door of the Agency's hospital, and they would be allowed entry. Once inside Grian's room, since it was a space they could guarantee was free of spyware, the Bamboozlers were free to remove their masks. Sure, they had to keep them close in case of spontaneous check-ups, but it wasn't too bothersome.

"Are you alright?"

Scar came back to himself at the question, nodding. "Yes, I'm fine. Sore, but fine."

Grian leaned forward to glance over the edge of the bed, presumably down at Scar's leg. Last he had seen it, there was still a scrape there from Morphling's wolf form. It had since been thoroughly cleaned and wrapped, but Grian was always prone to worrying.

"Look." Scar reassured him by rolling up his pant leg and showing off the bandages. "I did it myself."

Grian made a noise of approval, and relaxed into his pillows again, satisfied. Then, his eyes widened. His hand — the one not actively squeezing Scar's so hard that he thought he heard a pop — shot out in front of him. He spread his fingers, clenching and unclenching his fist repeatedly. Grian's jaw dropped.

"*Woah*… My arm," he gasped. "It's not broken."

“Technically, you’re right,” the villain confirmed. Grian brought his arm back, and Scar allowed him to detangle their fingers so he could trace over the patch of pink skin near his shoulder where he’d been shocked. It too was hardly noticeable, compared to what it’d once looked like. “They’ve been coming in to work their magic every few hours to heal your bigger wounds slowly. It’s turning out great.”

It was a strange process to watch — doctors shuffling through the door in silence, pressing their palms against various injuries, and encasing them in a golden glow for a handful of minutes, before leaving again. On occasion, one or two would stay back to change out the IV bag or mess with some of the various machines.

They never spoke a single word to Scar during the entire process. The Watcher had obviously told them not to, though he wasn’t stupid enough to be offended by it. Just because they’d struck a deal, called a temporary truce, didn’t mean he was on friendly terms with the Agency. The enemy of his enemy simply happened to be mutual enough to warrant a ceasefire.

Under different circumstances, these top-notch healers would be considered a huge pain. They were the reason his opponents could bounce back no matter how many blows he’d landed, no matter how much blood he’d spilled. To get rid of them would put the Agency on the back foot. Were they not actively caring for the man Scar loved, he probably would’ve exploited these close quarters as a means to eliminate them.

Instead, he got to watch them do the impossible. Even if discolored or marred skin remained, there seemed to be no injury too great for their talents. They were one step off from being able to bring back the dead with their speed and efficiency. Grian would need physical therapy, as they were unable to reverse the effects of malnutrition on his body, but he was still going to be alright to return to his life soon.

God, Werewolf really had saved them so much pain in the end, hadn’t

he?

This was an indescribably lucky scenario they'd wound up in. Scar never would have admitted it to Grian, but he didn't know what they'd have done otherwise. None of the Bamboozlers were skilled enough caretakers to mend such a terribly broken arm. They couldn't erase the lasting effects, the tremors bad enough to end careers.

Their doctor had been so *weak* when they'd saved him, too. Bags under his eyes, rips in his scrubs, scrapes and bruises everywhere, a gauntness to his frame — the Gs had not been kind in any respect. The mental toll alone, especially for someone that hadn't ever truly experienced the world of heroes and villains, was immense.

Hell, they'd seen how the Gs' torture broke a minor villain. Locust was new on the scene when they arrested him. He had no time to build mental fortitude, and even though his tolerance for pain was similar to that of the Bamboozlers, everyone gave in eventually, everyone had a breaking point.

Scar might not have been able to endure it either, and he'd been tormented for years. It was why he had such a high tolerance, and next to no issue ending someone if need be. He had been getting into fights since his powers emerged in college, where he'd met the two that had become his Bamboozlers doing the same.

Anyone with visible powers and a grudge against the Agency's laws had to accept secrecy and violence. To keep their abilities, they had to be used regularly. But if anyone witnessed them in action, those people *had* to be taken out of the equation. It was messy, it was brutal, and yet, it was how he avoided being taken from his life.

Becoming a villain was a natural next step. With enough blood on their hands already, a couple of costumes sewn up by Jimmy was all it

took. Those two friends of his made it bearable, made it livable, made it worth continuing to fight, until eventually, no one could oppose them.

Sometimes, when Scar was alone, he wondered what his world would have looked like without his powers. Would he have felt empty? Incomplete? Bored? Would he have ended up in an office somewhere, stifled and alone? Or would he have, by some twist of fate, still met his Bamboozlers, still fallen for his vet, still found his happiness?

In that hypothetical world, would there be peace in their relationships? Would Lizzie be able to date her hero openly? Would Jimmy have asked Tango out earlier? Would Grian be more content to go about his day with a partner that didn't come with years and years of unchecked bloodlust?

He certainly wouldn't have had to go through weeks of torture in that alternate universe.

Scar studied Grian now, inventing and deconstructing scene after scene. Lost in the daydream, he almost missed the slight furrow to his doctor's brow.

"How are *you* feeling?" Scar propped his chin in his hands and tried his best not to let his own morose thoughts show through. His question, however, wasn't nearly innocent enough. Grian wouldn't miss a chance to analyze his inflection. Already, the vet was beginning to frown. There was no point in dancing around the true concern. "Anything… specifically bothering you?"

"Depends," Grian replied. "Do *you* think something is bothering me?"

Yes, Scar's mind jumped to supply, but he bit his cheek and shook his

head.

“Liar.” The vet immediately pointed out, “You’re fidgeting.”

Scar put his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Scar,” Grian sighed. “Out with it.”

The villain’s mood fell, a pit opening in his stomach. Grian wasn’t going to drop this matter until he got the truth. Still, Scar wasn’t sure he was strong enough to hear the answer. He had wanted to sit in silence with his partner for a while longer, ignoring reality.

He didn’t have that luxury anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Scar said, staring down at his lap. “About all of this. I never should have put you in danger.”

“Put me in danger?”

A flush rose to the villain’s cheeks, mortified that he had to go on. “If I had just… left you alone after our first run-in,” he clarified, sheepishly looking through his eyelashes at his partner. “None of this would have happened.”

Grian straightened. To Scar’s surprise, his face twisted into a furious anger. *“What?* Are you trying to say you wish we’d never become friends?”

“Huh?” Scar’s head shot up. He took his hands out of his pockets, setting them on the bed. “What?”

It was an insane conclusion to land upon, but his vet was prone to impulsive jumps. This was not the first, nor the last time he would misconstrue Scar’s words. Not that the reality of the situation made it any less absurd to hear. How had Grian managed this one?

“That’s what you just said,” Grian exclaimed, teeth clenched and eyes narrowed. “You just *apologized* for the thing that led to us becoming friends.”

Ah. Right. He *could* kind of see it now.

“I didn’t–!” Scar stammered, at a loss. His heart thumped rapidly, a burning guilt and shame pouring through him. “Okay, *yes,* maybe that’s what I said, but it isn’t what I *meant.”*

He took a deep breath, and slumped forward onto his partner’s cot.

“You got seriously hurt, Grian,” he said, trying to remain as serious as possible, even as a lump formed in his throat. “Being involved with heroes and villains has put you in a position that no regular civilian should have to endure. You’ve seen things… You *know* things that are *so* dangerous…”

“I’m aware,” Grian replied, quickly and succinctly. “What’s your point?”

While Scar struggled to think of the correct phrasing, his silence seemed to do something else to the vet. His anger shifted. A hurt flashed through Grian, and a visible bout of fear followed shortly after. Scar frowned at the expression.

"It's not because…" Grian trailed off, quiet. He didn't seem to believe his own thoughts. His eyes were clouded by indecision and irrationality. Still, with a cadence that suggested he didn't trust his own words, he murmured, "Are you… worried I'm going to be interrogated again?"

A cold chill spread through Scar's body.

"Excuse me? Interrogated?" His hands balled into fists around the cot's blanket. Doing his best not to let an untamed fury seep into his tone, he said, "I thought they… *tortured* you to frame us. Did they actually try to force information out of you too?"

Grian considered him, probably sensing his anger. Slowly, he nodded. "Yeah. They really wanted your name. Terra told me it was probably because they couldn't get it out of *him."*

Terra told him — that was enough to make Scar's blood boil. The man that had betrayed them years ago and actively participated in the plot to kill them, but he had the nerve to speak about his prior experiences while putting Grian through the same things? Scar didn't know the extent, but that mental picture alone put a bad taste in his mouth.

Sparing the ex-hero's life had not been his choice. Truthfully, if he'd gotten his way, not a soul would have left that theater alive. Not even the Watcher upon her arrival.

Especially not the Watcher.

That wretched woman and her despicable Agency were the reason no powered person could lead a normal life. She was cruel in every sense of the word — requiring anyone showing signs of abilities to turn themselves over to her, putting a price on their heads, so any non-powered person would be rewarded upon reporting them, forcing people like Scar, who didn't *want* to be on her staff, to resort to gruesome means to stay hidden.

She deserved to die.

Though, he was too practical of a villain to not recognize how the fallout of a death like hers would spell the end for him too. The Bamboozlers were too powerful to be arrested by the Agency, but only because they stuck to the Watcher's regulations.

If one day, whether by her sudden passing or a simple change in her mood, she decided villains were fair game to slaughter, they were doomed. It was why the prospect of her accepting those weapons was so intimidating to them. The Watcher had *thousands* at her beck and call.

In the same way the Gs were lucky that the Bamboozlers had never really been going for their throats until recently, they were fortunate to be pawns in a vital game. The Watcher hated their disruptions, hated the money they cost her, hated the way they embarrassed her heroes, but she loved them at the same time. She loved the show they put on, the attention they brought, the PR they created.

After all, without fearsome villains, how could an agency of heroes amass any power?

Unfortunately, while lost in thought, he neglected to account for his

facial expressions. Upon seeing how Scar's mood worsened and hearing no immediate response, Grian's eyes had gotten wide with fear again.

"I didn't actually tell them anything, though," Grian blurted. "I swear, I didn't give up anything that could compromise you."

Scar blinked. He stared at Grian, taking in the way his doctor looked primed for a bad response. His posture was tense, nose scrunched, hands fidgeting — as if the idea of him telling the Gs anything *mattered,* as if that was going to change how Scar viewed him.

"Grian, they were *torturing* you," Scar pointed out. "I don't care *what* you said."

Grian paused, expression wiping clean and morphing into one of surprise. "You… don't?"

"No, not at all," Scar said, a half-laugh punching out of him, though there was nothing funny about this. "You could have told them my name, my address, or every single weakness I've ever had and I wouldn't have cared!"

"Oh," his partner replied. Gradually, Grian relaxed, and after a minute, he cleared his throat. "So, since it wasn't that, why *did* you bring up the other stuff?"

A shame that they'd ended up back on this topic.

Scar chewed on his lip, contemplating. Anxiety had formed a well in his heart, lined with lead and poisoned more and more by his own

stupidity. He wasn't alone about this particular fear, at least. Every Bamboozler had been worrying over the possibilities since their rescue mission had ended.

But it *had* to be said. They couldn't carry on like normal without addressing the situation. They had caused Grian to get hurt. They had ruined his perfect, average life. They had subjected him, inadvertently, to anguish like no other.

There was no telling if history would repeat again in the future.

Grian needed to know that. Grian needed to have all the information. Grian needed to be free to make that choice, and be aware that it was available to him to begin with.

No matter how badly it would hurt.

"I just wanted to let you know that…" Scar said, nauseous. He took a deep breath and released his sentence in one rush of breath. "I would understand if you didn't want to keep interacting with us. We, uh, wouldn't hold it against you if you left."

The vet reeled back like he'd been struck.

"What?"

Grian's mouth fell open, and an incredulous scoff left his person. His bafflement returned tenfold. He practically threw himself off the bed to grab Scar by both shoulders. His face looped through a million different emotions. Confused, terrified, and angry seemed to be the main three.

The entire hospital could probably hear him shouting, “If I *left?”*

Scar couldn’t speak. It was clear that Grian was waiting for him to, though. He wanted the man to explain himself, probably, or brush it off as a joke. But Scar couldn’t do that. Even if he were able to fill his lungs and form a sentence, he wouldn’t take back what he’d already said. It was the truth, whether either of them liked the idea or not.

Grian balled his fists up in the fabric of Scar’s sweatshirt, waiting, waiting, *waiting.* And finally, when it was clear that the villain was not going to retract his statement, he just collapsed forward, head against his chest. The tension melted out of him in one large shudder.

“Don’t even *suggest* something like that,” Grian whispered. “I’m not going to leave you.”

Scar’s heart skipped a beat. Tentatively, he brought his hands up to rub circles into the base of his partner’s spine. His tongue was heavy as he muttered, “Are you… sure? What about—”

“I *know* I got hurt.” Grian pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. “And I won’t pretend I’m not a little scared that it could happen again. Still, I wouldn’t *leave* you.”

The villain stared at his partner, honesty bleeding out of him.

“I told you the last time you tried to push me away,” Grian said, softer this time. “You make my life weird and hard and exhausting and nothing makes sense when you’re around, but I’d *never* want it to stop completely.”

Scar remembered a dim apartment, the smell of liquor layering his doctor's words, the urge to kiss him bubbling to a head with every passing moment. He remembered a similar guilt making a home inside his chest, overcome only by Grian's insistence. Months ago, when their biggest issues were misunderstandings and burning feelings.

His eyes pricked with tears, too sudden and necessary to fight back. Scar blinked through the blur to find his partner with a similarly wet expression.

"Please," Grian choked out. "Don't ever ask me to leave again."

All at once, Grian yanked him into a hug. The movement was far too rough for what his healing frame should have allowed, but Scar was too far gone to protest. At the slightest suggestion of comfort, the villain crumpled. He reciprocated the embrace, though more carefully, and broke down into full-body sobs.

They stayed like that for several minutes, mutual tears soaking through each other's clothes. Weeks of pent up emotions spilled out upon their shoulders, hands clutching and hearts beating in tandem. It took several minutes for them to calm, until they were only holding on for the sake of it.

Scar did, eventually, pull back to reach for the tissues. He handed Grian one, and they shared a smile as they blew their noses. The little trashcan beside the vet's cot found itself with quite a few additions by the time they'd fully returned to a semi-presentable state. Grian's eyes were still red and puffy, though, and he likely wasn't much better.

Scar trembled as he laughed, thick and a little congested. "You know, I didn't actually *ask* you to leave," he sniffled. "Believe it or not, I

want you around.”

Grian smacked the side of his head, but before Scar could complain, lips were colliding with his own in a desperate display. His doctor kissed the air from his lungs, tasting of salt and blood and *home*.

Scar melted into it. His arms looped around the waist of the man he loved, and he kissed him right back.

Blood dripped from Grian's hands, skin stained red. The chill of death crept up his spine, taking with it the final breath of the person he loved most. Scar's lifeless body hung limply from his arms — his mask shattered, costume torn, a knife buried in his gut, right where an arrow had once been yanked free.

His eyes were still open, dull and boring right into Grian's soul. They pleaded for an answer from him, a reason for his betrayal, for his senseless murder.

A snake curled around Grian's throat, stealing his pleas for forgiveness. Its voice was a gentle hiss in his mind as it attempted to persuade him to drive the knife deeper. The vet recoiled, dropping Scar's body.

However, before it could hit the ground, Grian watched it twist and reshape itself into a reflection of himself. Pale, unmoving, barely breathing, far too stiff. The floor became a cot beneath his head, and the void filled with a fluorescent hum of light.

He was only able to float above the scene as two people, a man and woman, moved into view. A spectator to his own demise, kept that way by the snake, unyielding and permanent. A curved, scythe blade was held to the throat of his more tangible, unconscious self. A syringe was pressed into his arm.

Morphine.

They were killing him. He was back in that safehouse, back in their hands, back at their mercy, alone and scared and on the brink of death. He tried to scream, tried to thrash, tried to stop them, but the snake tightened. It squeezed more, more, more, tighter, tighter, tighter!

Grian shot up in bed, a choked scream halfway out of his lungs.

“Huh?” A voice reached his ringing ears, low and rumbling. “Grian?”

The vet did not respond to his name, couldn’t even spare a thought towards who had said it. Frantically, his sleep-filled eyes darted around the dim room. White, sterile, *unknown.* The only light came from the various screens scattered about the place, bathing his surroundings in an ominous shadow. He kept waiting for something to jump out, someone to step forward, a predator to finally close in on its prey.

His gaze landed on the IV to his right, and he jolted. Flashes of his dream, his memory, and his alternate self rushed forward. Fiction blurred with reality. Black spots filled his vision, a snake that didn’t exist curled around his lungs, and a wave of nausea pulled a cry from him. His hands shook, fumbling as they tried to pull the line out.

“Oh God,” came that same voice, aghast. Someone touched Grian’s shoulder and his breathing grew more desperate, like it would come to a stop at any point. He needed the IV out, the threat of morphine away from him, his death pushed as far out of range as it could possibly get. “No, don’t do that! Shoot–!”

The needle came out, and Grian dropped it, a sob ripping out of him as it began to bleed. He squeezed his arm, waiting to feel the hot rush of morphine clouding his system. He waited to be consumed by a haze. He waited to feel steel against his skin, aiming to kill.

Instead, two palms cupped his cheeks. A thumb swiped over his cheek, while a soothing hum broke through the panic that had taken over his mind. Vaguely, he registered the familiar cologne, the familiar lilt to

the words, the familiar comfort of this embrace. His eyes blinked open, landing upon Scar, distorted by tears.

"It's okay," Scar whispered. "You're safe. It was just a dream."

Slowly, he removed a hand from Grian's face to tug at his wrist. The vet let himself be moved, even though he was plagued by the idea of one of his limbs leaving his immediate vicinity making him vulnerable. His palm was maneuvered to press against the other's heartbeat.

Tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump.

Steady, consistent, alive.

Nothing like the figure he'd seen in his dreams. There was no blood here, no knife, no limp form.

Grian felt Scar's lungs swell beneath his hand. Rising and falling in gradual, calming patterns. Lips pressed to the top of his head, gentle and real. Without fully registering himself beginning, Grian took a shaky breath in, matching his partner's pace.

They stayed still for several minutes. Scar kept muttering reassurances, but the vet only caught a couple of them through the static in his mind. The sound of his voice was enough to lull Grian down from his adrenaline spike. Using what little bit of strength he could muster, he did his best to loop only positive messages through his thoughts.

He was safe. He was with Scar. He was alive. They were both alive.

“Good,” Scar coaxed, bumping their foreheads together. “Breathe.”

The sterile smell didn’t remind him of the infirmary of the safehouse. These were the kind of scents he’d encounter at work, the profession he loved so dearly, while surrounded by a staff of friendly faces. The IV wasn’t intended to harm him. It was his primary source of hydration after being malnourished for so long. No one was coming to get him. None of his enemies could reach him anymore.

Grian curled his fingers into the fabric of Scar’s shirt. His voice was hoarse as he rasped, “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Scar said. Slowly, his arms moved to wrap themselves around the vet’s torso. Grian allowed himself to be pulled into a hug, allowed himself to focus on the pleasant pressure of a body against his own. “This is normal.”

And it was. He knew that. Just another regular reaction after enduring serious psychological trauma. It would fade eventually, but for now, this was something he would have to adjust to. Nightmares were normal. This response was normal. The things he saw were normal.

That didn’t make it any easier.

Scar squeezed him. Grian didn’t even try to hold himself up, or fight his rising tears.

He cried into the other’s shoulder, until the fabric was soaked through and his sinuses were a mess. He cried into his partner’s embrace, until his heart monitor slowed to a normal pace and his vitals evened out. He cried for as long as Scar would let him, until he ran out of tears

and his nightmare was nothing but a figment of his imagination.

“I think… you should,” Grian spoke after he had regained enough oxygen to manage words. “You should go… get a nurse to put my IV back in.”

Scar did not loosen his hold.

“Not yet,” he whispered. “I won’t leave you yet.”

Grian’s eyes fell shut. His heart warmed. Gently, so as not to hurt himself or his partner, he leaned back, tugging Scar along with him. They stayed like that, intertwined on the hospital cot, until Grian could remain conscious no longer. His next sleep was mercilessly empty.

For all that it was nice to be alive and healing, staring up at the ceiling had begun to get boring. He had been getting more hours of sleep thanks to his new medication from the doctors, meant to lower how many nightmares bothered him. Unfortunately, that meant that his waking hours also increased, since he wasn’t dozing in and out randomly. This development led him to rely mainly on the people around him for entertainment.

There were, thankfully, a great many things to catch up on. Lizzie and Jimmy’s worlds were the most interesting of them.

“Joel’s just been having a slumber party at my place for the past few days,” Lizzie had told him. “It’s great, honestly. You should stay in this hospital for as long as possible. It’s the biggest break he’s had

from the Agency since we started dating."

Grian just laughed, "I bet Meri is thrilled."

"Oh, totally. And you want to know the best part?" Lizzie leaned in closer, lowering her voice. "He's gossiping about his coworkers to me for the first time ever. I guess since the Gs are out of the game, he's not scared about getting in trouble at work for talking about them."

That *did* sound like a massive perk, especially to a guy bored to death in a hospital room.

"Quick, before Scar gets back," Grian snickered. "Give me the most interesting thing he's told you so far."

"Okay, um… Oh! You know Slayer, right?" Lizzie's eyes lit up with mischief. "Well *apparently,* the Gs were super jealous of her and Joel being the top heroes and getting all the credit, but they were pretty sure Daybreak had a *different* reason to be jealous."

Grian did recall the few times the Gs let it slip to him that they weren't happy with their treatment at the Agency. They felt undervalued by the city they protected, always being put second to the iconic duo. Daybreak contributed to those conversations too, in her own little ways, but it was never quite as explicit as her teammates tended to be.

He had a feeling he knew where this was going. It was impossible to hold in his surprise.

"No *way."*

“Yes,” Lizzie confirmed. “She’s had a *massive* crush on Slayer for years. Daybreak was always trying to show off to get her attention.”

Grian raised a hand to his mouth, suddenly wishing he’d been paying attention to the two of them during his escape several nights ago. Unfortunately, he’d been half-dead and horrendously distracted. “Does Slayer know?”

“I think so,” the other hummed. “But it never went anywhere. Even if she was planning on giving her a chance at one point, it’s definitely unrequited now. Slayer was *not* a fan of their betrayal.”

She went on to describe a few more mindless activities she’d been getting up to with her boyfriend. Grian enjoyed it all, whether it was gossip or just them painting each others’ nails. Lizzie predicted Joel would be really busy once he returned to the Agency. The Watcher was struggling to replace five of her best heroes with little to no warning.

He was glad to be providing an excuse for the couple to spend quality time together. It made the whole process of recovery a lot easier.

However, Lizzie was not the only one around to provide information on romantic developments.

“Tango asked you on a *date?”*

Grian’s jaw had dropped when he heard the news. Jimmy had only, very sheepishly, admitted to this fact during his third visit to the hospital. He seemed reluctant to reveal that his love life had prevailed while the vet was being held captive.

But considering what he already knew about those two idiots, it *would* take circumstances as weird as those to finally push them to confess. While Grian wasn't necessarily pleased that he missed it, this wasn't bad at all.

"When and where is he taking you, exactly?" The vet had done his best to seem nonchalant as he pried for further details. He stirred his soup more than was needed, not interested in the tray once such intriguing information was presented to him. "Somewhere nice, I presume?"

"Uh, probably," Jimmy hummed, tugging on the hem of his sweater.

Grian narrowed his eyes. "Has he not told you?"

"Well, it's just," Jimmy started, before trailing off. He lifted a hand to his forehead, where the cut from Daybreak was still in the process of getting better. "I asked him to wait until I was all healed up. It's a big step for us, so I want to look good."

"Oh," was Grian's eloquent reply. The injury itself *was* a nasty one, but the face had the tendency to put itself back together pretty quickly. He knew that because of his own facial injury — the cut given to him by Daybreak which was, by then, fading into just a thin scar. Jimmy wouldn't have to wait too much longer until his was the same way. Still, the embarrassed redness in the other's ears was hard to ignore. "You shouldn't let that bother you so much. I don't think you look bad now, Jim."

Jimmy had frozen the second his words were out. "What?"

“I said you don’t look bad.” Grian raised a brow. “It’s just a scrape. I’m sure your little *boyfriend* is used to seeing stuff like that, given your profession. It’s not a dealbreaker by any means.”

Jimmy simply continued staring at him, mouth slack. The vet frowned, waving a hand in front of his face. He glanced over to Scar and found his partner was wearing the same expression.

“You called me by my real name,” Jimmy whispered. “Not Tim.”

Grian’s eyes widened. Suddenly, his soup was very interesting again.

“Maybe,” he muttered. “Don’t get used to it.”

In his peripherals, he saw Jimmy begin to smile.

Needless to say, his friends kept him thoroughly distracted when they were around. During his downtime, he and Scar sat in quiet contentment, often with their hands intertwined.

If his thoughts became too overwhelming, he would engage his partner in idle chatter. It never seemed to bother Scar that sometimes they were the same questions or comments over again. It never seemed to bother him that he hadn’t divulged the whole of his experience to anyone else yet. Small bits came according to his comfortability — like how he got certain injuries, how much he’d been allowed to eat, or why he’d lose his appetite if the nurse brought his food with a little vase of decorative flowers on the tray.

He would tell Scar more, in time. For now, he was content to be gentle with his own memories. There was always the chance of being called

into a private court by the Agency, where he might be forced to dredge it all up for a much larger audience, so best to take it easy while he could.

Grian had been in the hospital for four days before he was presented with a brand new cellphone. He hadn't realized exactly how much he missed having one until it was back in his hands.

The device they gave him had a sleek, red case, and contained, apparently, six different kinds of emergency trackers. Tango had been commissioned to install each and every one of them, in case Grian needed a quick way to call for help in the future. They'd managed to save all his contacts and photos too, which the vet was endlessly grateful for.

He facetimed Jimmy in his apartment to see Pearl and Maui, as well as Jellie, who had actually begun to get along with the other two while he was away. The cats yowled at the sound of his voice, but ultimately could not comprehend the concept of a screen, so he would have to wait until he was home to remind them of how much he loved them.

Scar made a point to direct him towards the news, where Grian was able to read what the media had to say about the recent situation with the Gs.

"Team of four rogue heroes allegedly found responsible for the kidnapping of an anonymous civilian," the main headline read. *"Rescue mission resulted in the death of two, while the remaining heroes await a trial date. Possible connection to the sudden arrest of the CEO of Secret Keeper Corp."*

While it aligned with their earlier goal of keeping the Bamboozler's name away from the incident, Grian raised a brow at their vague

phrasing.

Knowing their city, that would cause more harm than good. He already saw chaos unfolding in the comments. Social media would be teeming with speculation. The Agency's PR department would definitely be working overtime to spin it in a good light.

"This publicity is great for them. They'll make a point to emphasize how just and civil they are for holding their very own heroes up to their golden standard," was Scar's opinion on the matter. "The public will revere them for their sense of duty, even if they get a little up in arms about their sweethearts secretly being monsters."

Grian was pleased to be left out of such a matter. None of that mental gymnastics nonsense would apply to him for as long as he was kept anonymous. The Agency had professionals behind their propaganda. They would handle it easily.

Otherwise, the information gathered from that headline had brought some amount of peace to Grian. If the Agency did indeed stay firm in their approach of pinning everything on the rogue nature of their ex-heroes, then even if some information was withheld, the remaining two Gs would face a long sentence for their crimes.

"Joel says that the Watcher is using this opportunity to bring down Mr. Keeper too," Lizzie had told him during one of her drop-ins. "She's apparently hated him for *ages.* His weapons being on the scene is enough to incriminate him."

There was no word about Terra, from the Bamboozlers or the media. Some people had put the pieces together and begun to operate under the assumption that the Gs were the ones at fault, and yet, almost no posts came up if one were to search for that specific hero's alias. Grian found it hard to believe that people weren't saying it.

He wondered about the likelihood of the Agency's staff simply wiping it clean. They'd done it to Terra before by eliminating Locust from the mind of the public. Terra was too established as a figure to fizzle out completely, but it was possible they'd be able to suppress anything calling for his arrest.

And that was enough.

Just like Grian, as long as Terra was free — as long as *BigB* was free — he would be happy. That had always been his only goal. Now, he had it.

Only one aspect of the vet's new phone needed a bit of effort to recover. That was his history of past calls and texts, which had, due to some alleged cluttering, been difficult to pull all at once. Eventually, they figured it out, and after a bit of downloading, his backlog came through.

Big mistake.

Mumbo had texted him six hundred and ninety-three times. He had thirty-seven missed calls from him, and an extra two dozen from Skizz. At least half of all calls had a voicemail attached as well.

Scar's face had gone pale when he read the number of notifications.

Needless to say, about half a day later, some strings had been pulled, and they'd gotten approval from the Watcher to allow two extra visitors into the Agency.

The door burst open, nearly flying off its hinges as two figures in scrubs dashed inside. Identical bags of tools were dropped by the entrance, like both had flown out of the clinic as fast as possible for this meeting.

Mumbo practically bent himself in half over the end of Grian's bed to cry out, "Grian! You're alive!"

Skizz, who that afternoon was donning scrubs reminiscent of a cow, was a little more casual about his approach. He stopped at Grian's bedside, next to where Scar was sitting, and fell to his knees.

"Buddy," he said, deadly serious. "You *gotta* answer your phone."

Despite how genuinely torn up his friends seemed, Grian couldn't help but laugh. Their faces were so refreshing. He never thought he'd miss the sight of those ugly scrubs, or be allowed to witness Mumbo's mustache in such an unkempt state.

"I'm sorry, you two," he chuckled, cheeks hurting from the force of his smile. "My phone was shattered in the crash. I called as soon as I could."

"I can't believe you tried to drive while you were still loopy on your medication," Skizz groaned, head dropping against the blankets of his cot. "Going from stupidly sick to hospitalized in a car crash is not cool of you."

"Not cool is the understatement of the century, actually," Mumbo declared, loud enough for his voice to echo down the hall. Scar stood and closed the door. The mustached vet stole his seat at Grian's side without hesitation, taking his friend's hand in his own. "How could you be so unbelievably daft?"

Grian pretended to be ashamed of his own actions. The car crash lie had been made up by one of the Agency's doctors to keep up the façade of being uninvolved with the recent hero drama. It lined up with the types of injuries he'd sustained, though the more severe ones were already much better.

The lie about being sick was apparently Scar's creation. His lovely partner had been kind enough to call in sick for work on his behalf for two weeks. It was what kept his friends from finding out he was missing, which only would have made them worry more.

Combining the two fibs, however, had led to quite an interesting series of fake events. Scar had — to keep up with the continuity of the story — taken a baseball bat to his car to make it seem as though it had been through the wringer. Those photos had been sent to his friends alongside their invitations to the hospital.

"I know," Grian said, giving a dramatic wince. "I've learned my lesson. I definitely won't be letting myself anywhere near the wheel when I'm not in perfect health again."

Scar shuffled back over, but discovered a slight problem. He sent an incredulous look in Grian's direction and pointed to Mumbo, silently mouthing, *"He took my chair!"*

Grian did his best not to laugh at the way his partner was made to hover awkwardly behind Mumbo instead.

"I can't believe you landed yourself in the charity ward, man," Skizz said. "Ain't this place reserved for people with, like, terminal illnesses?"

“I already explained over the phone,” Grian retorted. “Werewolf witnessed the whole thing and brought me here himself. He’s got the connections it takes to get someone into this part. It was really cool. I’m super grateful.”

“Werewolf,” Mumbo echoed, sniffling and pathetic. His head bowed, elbows resting on the mattress. “Yeah, he is a good guy. I’ve only heard great things about him.”

There came a gentle muttering from him, mostly inaudible and definitely intertwined with sobs. All the anger the man had been harboring upon stepping into the hospital had converted into tears. Grian’s heart squeezed. He reached over and ruffled his friend’s hair.

“Don’t scare us like that again,” Mumbo whispered, voice cracking and empty. He glanced up, and Grian saw his huge eyes had become red and puffy. “You’re not allowed to get sick or hurt ever from now on, okay?”

Skizz patted the sobbing vet on the back, and shot a look at Grian that implied he was holding tears of his own inside. “I’m with the big guy. You have to be more careful in the future.”

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Mumbo whirled around and grabbed Scar’s hand.

“Oh, uh,” Scar stammered. “Do you… need a tissue or something?”

“A whole box, but that’s not the point,” Mumbo affirmed, sounding so nasally that it was almost hard to understand him. Scar passed him the nearest container. “What I actually want is for you to *promise* me this won’t happen to him again.”

Both Scar and Grian flinched *hard*.

"God," Scar hissed, but he didn't pull his hand away or make any sort of excuse. He glanced up at Grian, that familiar, guilty look of his returning. "I promise. I'll do everything in my power to keep him safe for as long as I can."

Grian gave him a small, private smile.

"Good," Mumbo sniffled, nodding. "Good."

He released Scar, and took Grian's hand in his again. With his other, he lifted a tissue to his nose and blew it loudly. There was absolutely nothing pretty about it, but no one was going to criticize the guy while he was already down in the dumps.

"You guys have my blessing or whatever," Mumbo said, throwing the tissue away.

Grian raised a brow. "Your… blessing?"

"Yeah," the other replied. "To date."

Scar narrowed his eyes, mouth opening and closing in confusion. Grian was frozen in place, similarly unable to make sense of what he was hearing. Mumbo looked between the two of them. His expression morphed into one of horror.

“Don’t tell me… you weren’t going to ask for my blessing?” He gasped, hand flying up to clutch at his pearls. “Oh my God. You didn’t really think I was going to let my best friend date someone without *explicit* permission from me, did you?”

“Wow, dude. Harsh.” Skizz clicked his tongue, though his disappointment seemed to flicker to Scar for some reason. “And after we went through so much trouble preparing a kennel for those puppy dogs your friend brought in a few nights ago? With absolutely no warning, might I add? Unbelievable!”

“Right, uh, yes,” Scar rushed to say. “I am really thankful you guys did that for us on such short notice. Have they been picked up yet?”

“Yeah, we called the number that’s attached to their chip, and the woman who dogsits for their owner finally answered the phone yesterday,” Skizz said. “She told us her old one had been stolen or something and she only just managed to transfer her number to a new model. The whole time, she was sayin’ how grateful she was that someone saved them.”

Grian perked up, remembering a part of a conversation he’d overheard a few days prior.

“Oh? The dogsitter?” Scar hummed, calculating, as if that surprised him. “Not the owner?”

“Apparently, they travel a lot for work,” Skizz continued, completely unaware of the double layer to his conversation. “Dogsitter’s home with the pups more often than not. Either way, they’re out of our care now.”

Grian met Scar’s eye.

So, the dogs *and* the dogsitter were still alive.

He was right. Scar *wouldn't* do something like that. All that while, Morphling and the other Gs had been insisting that his partner was an irredeemable monster, and Grian had been *right.*

A smug satisfaction spread through his chest.

"Ugh, can it with the work nonsense when we're off shift," Mumbo grunted. Gently, so as not to disturb any tubing, he shook Grian. "You forgot to ask for my blessing! This is serious business!"

Oh, were they still on that?

Grian frowned. "Um, sorry? I didn't realize it… meant that much to you."

"Brilliant," Mumbo scoffed, rolling his eyes and throwing his arms up in the air. Grian's confusion only worsened. The other vet turned to the two in the room beside him. "Can you believe this? He forgot the oath we made in college!"

"The… oath?" Grian narrowed his eyes. "What–?"

"You really don't remember any of it?" Mumbo made a scene of rubbing his face with his hands, and then shrugged at the two onlookers. "Guys, can I have a moment alone with Grian? Clearly, he needs to be reminded of our sacred bond."

Scar raised a brow. “You want us to… leave the room?”

“Yes,” Mumbo said, before recoiling a little at his own insistence. “Please?”

Skizz and Scar shared matching glances, but nodded. Mumbo escorted them out the door, and then slammed it shut behind them. As soon as they were out, his expression of mild irritation melted into one of genuine, wide-eyed concern. He practically sprinted back to the chair and grabbed Grian’s hands again.

“Okay, we’re alone,” Mumbo hissed. “You can tell me the truth. Why are you *really* in the hospital?”

Grian’s face fell.

“What?”

“Okay, you’re just going to have to… trust me,” the other vet started, looking around like someone might be listening. He leaned in and lowered his voice. “I remembered something a few days ago. I tried to call you, but obviously, you didn’t answer.”

Slowly, Grian repeated, “You… *remembered* something?”

Mumbo hesitated, blinking a few times.

“I know it sounds weird, but I was at work really late at night, and I was suddenly struck with this… memory, I think?” Mumbo trailed off, as if trying to recall specific details. He shook his head and elaborated, “It was sort of about you?”

Grian sucked in a breath.

Oh *God.*

He knew what Mumbo was about to say.

“Two people came into the clinic, and they asked me a lot of questions, mostly stuff about you,” the other vet went on, unaware of how things clicked into place by the second for Grian. “When you came into work, where you were at a certain time, who you… were dating…”

Mumbo’s eyes grew hazy, like it bothered him to remember.

“And I told them, G,” he said, growing quiet. “I don’t know why… I-I *know* better. Gosh, and *now*… I can’t even remember their faces.”

Mumbo met Grian’s eyes, confusion mixing with a devastating unknown. It was an expression that fully befitted the feeling of being questioned by Necromancer.

“Then, you suddenly turn up in the Agency’s most exclusive hospital,” his friend continued, brows furrowed. “And I’m supposed to believe that’s because of a car crash?”

Grian exhaled shakily. “Oh…”

Oh *God.*

“Sorry,” Mumbo said, wincing. “Sorry, that’s a lot.”

“No, it’s fine,” Grian replied, driven to do so by instinct alone, because his brain was far too chaotic to have managed anything like that consciously.

He took a minute to process what he’d learned. Mumbo had been under a long-term enchantment from Necromancer, just as Grian and Werewolf had as well. When they died, it would have snapped him out of it.

Vaguely, in between flashes of torture and fear, he recalled Morphling telling him that Mumbo was the one to expose his lies. They’d admitted to using their powers on him during that questioning session too. So much had happened since then that he’d forgotten.

Now, Mumbo had memories that didn’t make sense, and a best friend in the hospital. It was no wonder he was such a wreck. Anyone would jump to drastic conclusions after that. Anyone would yearn to know the truth after that. Anyone would look at him with this amount of hopelessness after that. Mumbo *needed* clarity, or it was going to haunt him for the rest of his life.

But the truth was *rough.*

Assuming learning about his friend’s double life as the doctor to the city’s worst supervillains wouldn’t give him a heart attack on the spot,

Mumbo would never forgive himself for being the reason Grian had been caught in a lie. They'd been best friends for years, practically inseparable. A betrayal almost leading to Grian's death, involuntary or otherwise, would *ruin* him.

So, a half truth was required. A new sort-of-lie. Just enough of reality to keep Mumbo sane. Just enough falsities to protect everyone else.

"Right, I see where you're coming from," Grian started, trying to remember to keep his blinking steady. "First things first, you are *not* the reason I'm hurt. I mean it."

Not directly, at least.

"And admittedly, I do know who you're talking about," Grian sighed. "I had… some very well-known clients that I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone about knowing. You're familiar with… Necromancer, correct?"

"Necromancer," Mumbo echoed. His eyes blew wide. *"That's* who it was. I remember the black veil and the shiny dress and…"

He trailed off, paling.

"Oh my goodness. Grian, I *spoke* to Necromancer. *She* approached *me,"* Mumbo annunciated, as if speaking it aloud made it real. The fan inside of him took over. His gaze brightened in that way it only did when he was watching a new scheme unfold on the news. He stopped abruptly, frowning. "Why did I speak to Necromancer, exactly?"

"They were running a… background check, I think," Grian said, which was only a lie of omission. "To make sure I wasn't malicious if they

ever wanted to use my services again. I would tell you more… but I signed something."

"Oh," the other replied. He slumped, a mixture of realization and relief flooding him. "So, that memory–?"

"Doesn't relate to my crash at all," Grian concluded, feeling slightly sick about this part of his tall tale. "I really got into an accident, and I really was rescued by Werewolf. I promise."

An accident could refer to many different things, after all.

"Yes, Werewolf, right." Mumbo dropped his hand and leaned back in the chair, stars in his eyes. "That is… so cool. Usually, Audiophile's the one that does evacuations and rescues. Do you realize how rare it is for Werewolf to interact with civilians? And he *personally* brought you to the hospital?"

Grian smiled.

Mumbo was allowing himself to act like a fan again. The half-truths had worked. He was going to be okay. They were both going to be okay.

"So," Grian started. A new topic of conversation interested him, one that turned his smile into something conniving and sharp. "I heard you got properly introduced to Scar while I was sick. Tell me everything."

“Are you sure you’ve got it?”

The elevator dinged, doors sliding open upon their floor. Grian rolled his eyes as Scar wheeled himself onto the landing and turned to block his partner’s way. His arms were outstretched, though three other grocery bags already rested on his lap.

“Yes, I’m sure,” the vet chuckled. “I’ve been in physical therapy for two weeks already. My arm isn’t giving out under heavy weight anymore. Besides, we’re basically home.”

Grian sidestepped him, heading directly for the apartment door. He shifted the bag over to his healing arm while fishing for his keys simply to make a point. Judging by the sound of distress Scar let out, this did not go unnoticed.

“Come *on,* G,” his partner whined, slumping in his chair. “You never let me do *anything* for you.”

The vet paused his unlocking of the door to shoot Scar a flat look.

“Driving us to the store doesn’t count,” Scar said, cutting him off before he could make the argument. “Neither does cooking! I would do that stuff even if you weren’t recovering.”

Though he had a great many disagreements lined up, Grian pushed into the apartment without another word. Immediately, a tiny, furry body barreled into his legs at full speed. Having not anticipated the blow, his balance was woefully off kilter. He gasped, stumbling forward into the dark apartment, unable to gather his bearings, and beginning to tip.

The adrenaline that shot through his veins was hot and familiar — burning like a failed escape attempt, squeezing like a broken rib. He was out of control, too late to stop himself, powerless to prevent the oncoming pain. A small shriek left his lips, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

All at once, the tilting of the world jerked to a stop. The sensation of gelatine surrounding his entire body stole his attention. Grian peeked out, only to find the room around him tinted red. He hovered in the air, feet just barely touching the ground, and the grocery bag clutched far too tightly to his chest.

He relaxed into the sensation, panic releasing its hold on his mind. Grian was nowhere near the safehouse, nowhere near pain. Those things couldn't reach him anymore. It was all a figment of his imagination.

"Careful," his partner hissed from somewhere behind him. Scar took his hand, slowly easing his powers off the man while pulling him into an upright position. Once he was no longer in danger of toppling, the rosy encasement fell away. "Geez. That would've been a nasty fall."

"Definitely Maui's fault," Grian growled, gathering his breath and flicking on the light. Sure enough, the culprit was rubbing his face against the wheel of Scar's chair, oblivious to the chaos he'd almost caused. "Little rascal."

Scar sighed, and shut the door behind them to thwart any escape attempts. He nudged the cat away so that they could proceed into the kitchen, setting down their groceries. At his request, Grian helped Scar stand so he could lean against the counter.

There had been a slight shake to his legs since that morning, so he'd been in his chair all day. Honestly, he should have remained seated

while making dinner as well, but the guy was nothing if not stubborn when his mind was made up. He insisted he didn't need his crutch or his chair for the time being, but Grian kept both close by just in case.

The vet began unpacking their haul, spreading it out for his partner. A couple of things had to be retrieved from the fridge as well, but once it was all there, Scar brightened. "Alright," he huffed, a twinkle in his eye. "Fried rice, coming up!"

No recipe necessary, Scar began the process like it was second nature. Grian lingered by his side, lips pursed in contemplation. His partner hummed a small melody to himself. He moved with such expertise that it was hard to believe cooking was only a pastime to him.

His energy was infectious, and the vet found himself drifting nearer, wanting to get in on the action. "Do you need help with anything?"

Scar paused, his pan poised over the stovetop, veggies waiting to be stir-fried within. Slowly, he turned to Grian and gave him a polite smile. "Not really."

Grian scoffed. "I can't mess up rice."

"Can't you?" Scar scrunched his nose. "You *are* shockingly good at finding new ways to surprise me."

The vet narrowed his eyes at the backhanded compliment. While he wanted to claim the other's reluctance was unwarranted, he had, in a half-asleep daze, accidentally filled Scar's bowl of cereal with coffee a few mornings prior. It was a mistake he'd noticed immediately, and one that was remedied easily, but if he tried to fight right now, he knew it'd get brought up.

“Ah, but I do know something you can do for me to help in the long run,” Scar offered. Grian hummed his acknowledgement, expecting to be sent off to do another mindless chore. He realized he’d made a mistake when Scar’s lips twitched up into a smile. “Why don’t you grab your grip strength thingy and work out those muscles so you can help wash dishes later?”

“Ugh,” Grian groaned, head rolling back. “You want me to do *more* physical therapy? Today’s session was only, like, four hours ago.”

“Your instructor dude told you to work on it at home,” Scar retorted, making frustratingly valid points. “And how could I possibly let you help me if you can’t even hold onto anything?”

Grian stared at him, unblinking, for several seconds. Only when his eyes started to water and dry out did he relent. Grumbling to himself all the while, Grian made his way to the bedroom to grab it from his bedside table.

Pearl and Jellie were lounging together when he entered, occupying the same mattress but not forcing themselves into the other’s space. They purred a little louder as he ran a hand over their fur, the former even offering him a little chirp of appreciation. By the time he returned, he found Maui had curled up in Scar’s empty wheelchair, happily enjoying the warmth that its owner had left behind.

“This is pointless, by the way,” Grian huffed, collapsing into one of the kitchen chairs. A pleasant smell filtered from the stove. “They healed my arm with literal magic. I shouldn’t have to do PT for it like it’s still broken.”

“I don’t know why you’re so bothered by it,” Scar sighed. “It made me

feel a lot better when we started doing PT for *my* injuries."

His partner glanced over his shoulder.

"You didn't seem to mind either."

Grian flushed, pointedly averting his eyes.

"This is different," he argued. Mindlessly, he squeezed the grip strengthener a little harder. "You can't make these exercises romantic."

"Believe it or not," Scar laughed, pushing the rice around inside the pan. "None of them are *meant* to be romantic. That's just my natural charm bleeding into everything I do."

Grian rolled his eyes and let them lapse into silence. He listened to the rhythmic hiss of the pan, accompanied by the cracking of eggs as Scar added those in. His partner went back to humming a lulling, beautiful melody. The pan sizzled and popped. The kitchen filled further and further with the smell of good food, twisting Grian's stomach.

Having his appetite back was entirely Scar's fault. For days after returning from the hospital, he struggled to eat more than was absolutely required of him. But Scar never stopped cooking things that were too good to resist, even if Grian couldn't always finish his portions.

It'd begun to expand his stamina for food again, and for that he was immensely grateful. His meds always went down better on a full stomach. Not to mention, having enough energy to complete his daily

tasks was a feeling he'd never take for granted again. Every step towards his former, healthy self was worthy of pride.

And admittedly, as much as he despised having to do his tedious little exercises, they *were* helping just as much as the meals.

He had felt sore even post-magical healing. His once-broken arm hadn't trembled anymore, but clenching his fist for too long or lifting heavy objects made his muscles scream for relief. The arm that had been shocked was in a similar state. His scar had healed into a simple patch of pink skin, but occasionally, he felt the phantom pains of it reverberating through him. When he exercised, those went away.

Grian set the grip strengthener down for a minute and just stared at his hands.

It wasn't effortless, but they were getting better. *He* was getting better. Soon, he'd be well enough to help at the clinic again. Soon, the remains of his pain and the memory of his trembling fingers would fade into the past. Soon, he would be a vet again.

The clinking of plates brought him into the present. Grian watched his boyfriend distribute their food, stomach grumbling. Any amount of dishes afterwards were always worth it when it came to Scar's cooking. Now that he'd experienced the luxury of actual meals, he couldn't believe he'd lived for so long off takeout and simple preparations.

A portion was placed in front of him, accompanied by a kiss on the cheek. Scar slowly sat himself down across from the other man, and let their feet bump under the table. The fried rice was perfectly cooked, mixed with vegetables and protein that made his mouth water.

“Thank you,” Grian said, hardly containing himself. He took a bite, and savored each flavor on his tongue. So simple, so quick, yet so reliably good. A content sigh left him. “It’s like a work of art. You really are a wonderful chef.”

“Well,” the other said, grinning ear to ear. “I have a pretty great muse.”

Grian kicked him lightly. Scar gestured for him to take another bite, understandably proud. The vet did not have to be told twice. While he dug in, his boyfriend pulled something out of his pocket and placed it on the table. A black box, wrapped in a neat red bow.

Grian paused mid-bite, raising an eyebrow. Scar’s expression had softened. The box was pushed towards him. “I got you something.”

“What?” Grian set down his spoon. “When?”

“Today,” Scar replied. “Here, open it.”

The vet frowned, but hesitantly took it. “Today? But we were together for all of today.”

He pulled at the ribbon, watching it fall away. The lid came off with a smooth slide, and Grian’s mouth fell open at the sight of silver within.

A watch.

No, more than that — the *same* watch.

Grian stared down at the first gift Scar had ever given him. It very clearly wasn't the original one, since that had been destroyed weeks ago, but it was the same make, same model, same brand. He lifted it from its box and traced his thumb along the face. The hands ticked with the passing seconds, already set to the exact time.

He took a deep breath in, and let his gaze land on his partner. "You got it for me again."

"Of course," Scar said. "You loved it."

Grian huffed out an astonished laugh. "How did you pull this off today?"

"Had it ordered ahead of time," Scar replied. "Just had to pop by quickly and pick it up. Remember when I told you I was going to the bread aisle?"

Grian narrowed his eyes. "Yes?"

"Well, I *actually* hitched a ride with Tango to the mall and back."

The vet choked on air.

"You *did?"*

“I was back before you’d ever even realized I was gone,” Scar chuckled. “And it was all done legally.”

Grian’s heart swelled inside his chest. Scar had gone out of his way to return the beloved gift the vet had lost. He’d picked it out, spent the money, arranged a whole plan to keep it secret. He stared down at the timepiece, a new appreciation for every ounce of thought put into it.

Although, as his fingers shifted over its surface, he felt a strange series of grooves on the back. Curious, Grian flipped it over, only to find that those grooves were not so mysterious after all. A message had been engraved there, in small, looping letters.

I love you.

- S

Grian looked up, lips parting, to find Scar already watching him. He knew the vet had seen it, knew it was out in the open, knew those three little words had already plunged into his heart and made a home there. Scar seemed completely entranced by his reaction. His eyes were half-lidded, face cupped in his hands, and his smile overflowing with untamed fondness.

Except, it wasn’t *just* fondness.

Grian’s heart shot up into his throat, beating so quickly that he feared it might explode. His cheeks flushed, mind grew hazy, and he began to blink out of control.

Scar *loved* him.

He stood, chair tipping as it was aggressively shoved back. Grian rounded the table in two steps, practically throwing himself into the other's arms. He buried his face in the crook of Scar's neck, relishing in the arms around his middle and the cold metal of the watch still clutched in his arms.

"I love you too," Grian said.

Truer words had never left him.

Even before he knew what it was like to love Scar, he had loved Scar. He had loved him enough to wrap his injuries in the middle of the night. He had loved him enough to nurse his friends back to health. He had loved him enough to lie to a hero's face. He had loved him enough to fear for his life while poisoned. He had loved him enough to wait to make a move until he was better. He had loved him enough to picture his face in his worst moments.

He loved him now as they bickered over physical therapy, bought groceries, cooked meals, washed dishes, fed their cats, and fell asleep side by side. Grian loved Scar through the abnormal and the completely average.

Grian pulled away from the hug just to press a kiss to Scar's lips, brief but infused with every single atom of affection that ran through his veins. The man he'd found almost a year ago, beaten and bleeding in an alleyway, kissed him back with the same enthusiasm.

They parted a second later, noses brushing and faces aflame with mutual feelings. Lazily, like he was hesitant to let go, Scar reached out, fumbling for something on the table. When the sound of rising music filtered through his phone speaker, Grian was unable to hide his nostalgia.

He straightened, and offered Scar a hand.

“I believe,” Grian said, the past and present blurring into one, continuous memory. “I promised you a dance.”

“Yes, Doctor.” Scar stood, their fingers intertwining. His eyes crinkled as he smiled, perfect, real, and clear. Slowly, they began to sway. “I believe you did.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, after months of work, my 66.6k word beast of a chapter is complete. And with it, so too is this fic.

Firstly, I want to thank you all for 660K hits. What an insane number, my goodness.

I've tried to think of a million different things I could say here, but it's been difficult. I think it's because I haven't fully registered that this is over yet. Part of me never wants it to end, but every worthwhile story has its worthwhile stopping point. And, for Midnight Strangers, that is here.

This wasn't supposed to get as big as it did. It wasn't even supposed to be more than a oneshot. Still, if I hadn't kept writing, I never would have been able to experience this whirlwind of a community that you have all created for me. There's been inspired fics, fanart, whole tumblr communities, tiktok cosplays, podfic readings, and a discord full of people who love something I made, and I cannot begin to describe what that has felt like. I have met so many cool people, made so many new friends, and been given opportunities that never would have been possible without you guys.

Of course, the most amazing two people in the entire world have also gotten me through this. My two beta readers, Cody and Smiif, stepped up when I had a sudden family tragedy this past week and helped me edit this whole chapter, and I think, without them, this fic would never have been half as good as it is today. They are two of the funniest, most creative people I have ever

met. Please show them so much love, because they deserve it.

As for what I'm doing next, nothing is set in stone, but I hope that you'll follow me to my future projects. I have so many cool plans, and so many stories I'd like to share with you. To keep up with me better, I have a discord server, which you can join here!

If you want to support me in other ways, I have a couple of socials and alternative places where you can do that, which you can find here!

I really appreciate you guys. Thank you for reading.

See you next Tuesday <3

Works inspired by this one

Captured Nurse by StarCr0ssedL0v3r

A conversation after chapter 7 by SuiSoySui

in stasis (midnight strangers verse) by chasing_the_sterek

I've Been Waiting All Night To Know If You Kissed Me Just For Show by Retro_Fangirl

Vet duties. by Everything_black

all paths leads to you, on a sunny afternoon. by Xenphone

Mumbo Jumbo's AO3 history by RaspberryBoiWrites

Midnight Swap by Mambourin

Betraying Death Themself by CaladrianCrow

Scarian oneshot kinda by sidcantswim

Coincidence? by Kieran_Works

Rip Me Open by Anonymous

A Slip of Luck And Chance by Wensylilac

I'll Stay Forever Right Here, If You Want Me To by Maxwell_Disorder

Copy, Paste, Hit by MaybeNotSoBad

A World of Our Own by QuackeeDuck

Badminton, Boyfriends and Besties by CaladrianCrow

Hotguy.56 by Surtr_V556

When Strays Find A Home by Clue2B

should've started with that, probably by weretiguhs

Vet, Doctor, Who Cares by LinesAndColors

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